

Spring 2015

# 'Facing West': Walt Whitman's Evolving Attitudes Toward Manifest Destiny

Philip Ellefson  
*University of Portland*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_studpubs](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_studpubs)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Ellefson, Philip, "'Facing West': Walt Whitman's Evolving Attitudes Toward Manifest Destiny" (2015). *English Undergraduate Publications, Presentations and Projects*. Paper 2.  
[http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_studpubs/2](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_studpubs/2)

This Student Project is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Undergraduate Publications, Presentations and Projects by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact [library@up.edu](mailto:library@up.edu).

Philip Ellefson  
Senior thesis  
December 8, 2014

## 'Facing West': Walt Whitman's Evolving Attitudes Toward Manifest Destiny

In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman makes a bold attempt to transcend time and space. He tells his readers that "It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not" (*Leaves* 1892, 120), and he is confident that his ferry ride home to Brooklyn will resonate with all his readers, even those generations in the future and in distant parts of the world. But despite the poem's impressive language and grand scope, contemporary readers cannot help but think that Whitman falls just short of spatiotemporal transcendence. In 1883 (within Whitman's lifetime) the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge forced his beloved ferry into obsolescence. He claims that "Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd" (*LG* 1892, 121). In fact, the rise of the internal combustion engine has made it so that no 21<sup>st</sup> century reader sees masts or steam pipes lining Manhattan's shores. Perhaps Whitman was so enraptured in his particular spatiotemporal context – sunset on a ferry on the East River in 1856 – that he did not realize his transcendent fervor might have been a direct outgrowth of the physical space around him.

In the same way, Whitman's poetry regularly loses sight of the United States' particular spatiotemporal context – westward expansion. He claims at the beginning of "Song of Myself" that as a poet he holds "Creeds and schools in abeyance" (*LG* 1892, 30), but over and over again in his poetry he espouses the popular 19<sup>th</sup> century American creed of manifest destiny. And indeed, as Whitman's career progresses, his views on westward expansion change to reflect the

anxieties and attitudes of the United States as a whole. Just as Whitman's personal spatiotemporal transcendence in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" grows out of a particular moment in time and space, his ostensibly unconventional poetry grows out of the conventional 19<sup>th</sup> century belief that the nation is somehow destined to fill up North American space as time progresses.

Although the doctrine of manifest destiny makes its way into Walt Whitman's poems throughout his career, his outlook on U.S. westward expansion moves through three distinct phases. In his earliest poems, Whitman addresses manifest destiny only implicitly as he attempts to define the identity of the nation. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* presents a spatially equal America where the East is as great as the West and the North as great as the South. But within this message of geographic equality, Whitman implicitly advocates the expansion of the nation westward. As the Civil War becomes imminent, Whitman grows increasingly concerned with the nation's movement west and begins addressing manifest destiny more directly and more fervently, but also at times more skeptically. The conflicted messages in his Civil War-era manifest destiny poems stem from an anxiety that the United States will not fulfill the vision Whitman presents in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Finally, Whitman reacts to capitalism and imperialism after 1867 in an effort to maintain the nation's democratic integrity, yet his manifest destiny poems inadvertently espouse the same expansionist politics he tries to critique. Across these three periods of Whitman's career, his ideas about westward expansion change to reflect the U.S.'s shifting anxieties about its national identity and its place among the civilizations of the world.

## 1. Whitman's vision of a unified America in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1860)

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, discusses the westward course of empire far less than any of the later editions. The short attention given to manifest destiny doctrine comes in part from the fact that the 1855 edition is simply far shorter than any of the later editions; with only 12 poems, the first edition is fewer than 100 pages, far smaller than the hulking text of the final 1892 edition. But even taking its brevity into account, the 1855 edition is much less concerned with U.S. westward expansion than any of Whitman's subsequent work.

In "Walt Whitman and Manifest Destiny," Henry Nash Smith argues that prior to 1860, Whitman's poetry focuses largely on the nation's novelty and the need for an American poet to invent American literature. To achieve this project, Whitman "carries out a considered program in speaking equally for all sections of his country" (Smith 374). In other words, in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman talks about the West (and indeed about manifest destiny), but only because the West makes up a portion of Whitman's conception of America. In the first edition, Whitman pays just as much attention to the East Coast of North America as he does to the West, and his references to the West focus less on the process of expansion than on geographic equality across the continent.

Section 16 of "Song of Myself"<sup>1</sup> demonstrates this emphasis on the equality of North American space. At the beginning of a stanza largely cataloguing the vast spaces of North

---

<sup>1</sup> Whitman did not divide his seminal poem into numbered sections until the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, nor did he have a name for the poem. So while this section later becomes section 16 of "Song of Myself," it is just one passage of a long, nameless poem.

America, Whitman proclaims that he is “of the old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise...Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man” (*LG* 1855, 23). In this stanza, Whitman attempts to affirm the equality of all people in the nation. But the majority of the stanza is not about the diversity of individuals, but about the diversity of space in the United States. Whitman surveys the geography of the nation by claiming to represent all of its parts equally. He says he is “a southerner as well as a northerner...A Yankee...A Kentuckian...a Louisianan or Georgian,” and so on, extending eventually to “Californians” and “free northwesterners” (*LG* 1855, 23). He does not dwell on any one region of the United States more than another but treats all the spaces equally as he claims to treat all people equally. After he equalizes all American spaces and identifies with all American people, Whitman concludes, “I resist anything better than my own diversity” (*LG* 1855, 24). Whitman’s diversity – that is, the diversity of the nation – grows out of an equality of American space.

Whitman’s catalogue of the residents of diverse American places, though ostensibly equal, implies the westward movement of manifest destiny. While he meanders a bit around the continent, the order of states in his list travels more or less westward; it begins with the “Yankee” (New York is always the center of affairs for Whitman) and ends with people in the Pacific Northwest, which was the most distant corner of America’s geopolitical reach at the time. Furthermore, not all of the places in his list of American regions are part of the U.S. In 1855, the Pacific Northwest was Oregon Territory, not a ratified state. Even more, he lists among his survey of Americans someone “on Canadian snowshoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen off Newfoundland” (*LG* 1855, 23). Though we sometimes forget it in contemporary

thought, the idea of manifest destiny was not only to expand west towards the Pacific, but also to move north to Canada, south to Mexico, and even east to Cuba. Roger Asselineau point out that Whitman “dreams of the time when the same current of life will circulate from Mexico to Cuba to New York, when the Canadian will readily sacrifice himself for the Kansan and vice versa” (325). In 1855, the exact boundaries of the eventual United States were not yet set, so for Whitman, Canada was a part of the U.S. just as much as the Oregon Territory or New York City. By including spaces both inside and outside of the United States’ geopolitical reach, Whitman makes it clear that his vision of an equal America involves the expansion of the nation into a unified democracy across North America.

The implicit endorsement of manifest destiny in Whitman’s early poems is no surprise. In the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman expounds upon his role as an American poet, and it closely resembles section 16 of “Song of Myself.” After describing a long list of coasts and lands he hopes American poets will celebrate, he writes that “When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer [the poet] easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them” (*LG* 1855, iv). The preface tries to define a new American literature, and for Whitman, that new body of literature must reflect the changing size and shape of the nation. Though he claims to represent all American geographical spaces equally, he necessarily advocates for the geopolitical expansion of the United States into other parts of the continent.

In the remainder of the 1855 edition, any explicit reference to westward movement is only a passing comment. The doctrine of manifest destiny is only a matter of concern insofar as

it works itself naturally into his poems. One of the few other sections of “Song of Myself,” which takes up more than half of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, that addresses westward expansion is even more indirect. In fact, Whitman uses an odd allegory to support manifest destiny ideology, and the allegory is obscure enough that today most readers do not recognize it.

Dennis Renner asserts that section 11 of the poem should be read as an allegorical account of Texas joining the Union. Ostensibly, this section of the poem tells the story of a woman enticed by the sexual appeal of “Twenty-eight young men” she sees bathing by the shore. According to Renner, the 28 young men represent the 27 states plus Washington, D.C. that were a part of the Union in 1845, just before Texas became a state. The woman, who is enticed by and ultimately joins these men, represents Texas. For Renner, the important part of this allegory is not just that Texas is joining the U.S., but that the personification of Texas is an active, willing participant in an erotic sort of union. Texas, then, joins the nation naturally (not by force), as is natural for the doctrine of manifest destiny. The course of civilization is simply moving naturally westward, without any of the imperialistic rhetoric Whitman employs in his later poems. Furthermore, this account of the annexation of Texas is shrouded in what would have been a shockingly erotic description of men for Whitman’s original audience. Any point he is trying to make about moving west is secondary to the eroticism of the poem, again making Whitman’s westward movement only a backdrop for his poetry.

The national vision Whitman presents in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* also places America in the context of an even larger, broader westward course of civilization. In *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, Anders Stephanson explains that the uniquely

American doctrine of manifest destiny grew out of the older idea of *translatio imperii*, which holds that “civilization was always carried forward by a single dominant power or people and that historical succession was a matter of westward movement” (18). *Translatio imperii* has been used to legitimize various empires, but the basic structure of the theory is that civilization originated in western Asia and was carried west by the succession of Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, and (depending on who is employing the theory) Spain or England. For Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stephanson argues, the United States was the natural successor to England in the grand narrative of *translatio imperii*, and the theory counted as further evidence that the nation ought to expand west across the continent. The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains two poems that later become “Europe: The 72nd and 73rd Years of These States” and “A Boston Ballad.” These two poems do not comment specifically on American expansion westward, but they serve an important role in placing the United States in the context of *translatio imperii*.

“Europe” and “A Boston Ballad,” which blend into each other because of the 1855 edition’s continuity between sections and lack of titles, portray the torch of civilization being passed from Europe in the East to America in the West. The poem that becomes “Europe,” which dwells on the populist European rebellions in 1848 and 1849, is a harsh condemnation of the monarchical governments of Europe, which Whitman sees as backwards and outdated. A sympathizing anthem for the oppressed peoples of Europe, the poem condemns the “kings of Europe” for being “paid to defile the People” (LG 1855, 88). He goes so far as to call Europe a “stale and drowsy lair . . . the lair of slaves” (87) and paints the whole continent as an archaic



antithesis to the superior democracy of the United States. The subtitle he eventually gives the poem, “The 72nd and 73rd Year of These States,” proves that Whitman is measuring the old, stale, eastern political systems of Europe against the ever-progressing western and westward-moving democracy of the U.S. The world is now on the timeline of the United States because America has become the leader in this epoch of civilization, in accord with *translatio imperii*.

Furthermore, immediately following “Europe” is a poem that later becomes “A Boston Ballad,” which celebrates America’s independence from Great Britain and mocks the British monarchy. In the poem, Whitman (or some nationalistic speaker) makes a plan to ridicule King George decades after his death:

I will whisper it to the Mayor . . . . he shall send a committee to England,  
 They shall get a grant from the Parliament, and go with a cart to the royal vault,  
 Dig out King George’s coffin . . . . unwrap him quick from the graveclothes . . . . box up  
 his bones for a journey (*LG* 1855, 89-90),

and take his remains back to Boston, where the speaker intends to “set up the regal ribs and glue those that will not stay” because “The crown is come to its own and more than its own” (90). By reconstructing and erecting the skeleton of King George, Whitman transports Britain’s domination of the world – symbolized by the British crown – west to the United States. The poem’s nationalistic fervor contains an implicit westward movement from the Old World. Combined with its place directly after “Europe,” “A Boston Ballad” sets American democracy up as an heir to what Whitman sees as the consistent trend of civilization’s course westward.

The 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains little direct discussion of manifest destiny, but it does define America’s tendency westward in two important ways: first, America is the

heir to the world-historical process of civilization's westward course; and second, the U.S. itself is in process with the ultimate goal of becoming a unified, continent-spanning empire of democracy and equality.

## **2. North vs. South (East vs. West): Rising concern over the nation's fate (1860-1867)**

Whitman's vision of the United States as a unified democratic empire leading history westward is vital for understanding the next phase of his poetry, which deals much more directly (and at times obsessively) with manifest destiny. In 1860, Whitman published the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and added 133 new poems, many of them substantial.<sup>2</sup> These new poems are the first to grapple directly with the U.S.'s role in the American West; poems like "Starting from Paumanok" (and its anagrammatical companion "From Paumanok Starting"), "Facing West from California's Shores," "A Promise to California," and others with westward-moving forms appear first in this edition. Whereas the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass* placed "Song of Myself" at the front of the book, the 1860 edition's first poem is "Proto-leaf," which later becomes "Starting from Paumanok." The poem traces the journey of its speaker from New York to California, where "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a new world" (*LG* 1860, 6). This placement of westward expansion at the very front of the bulky third edition illustrates

---

<sup>2</sup> I will not expound here upon the difference between the first edition and the second edition, which was published in 1856. While Whitman did add some important poems in the 1856 edition (most notably "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), the second edition's vision of the nation and its expansion remain largely the same.

Whitman's obsession with the American West and manifest destiny throughout the Civil War years.

The Civil War, in fact, was the conflict that prompted Whitman's prolific writing on the West and westward expansion. For Whitman, the Civil War was not so much about America's North-South axis as it was about the East-West axis. If the U.S. was supposed to be a huge, unified North American nation fostering democracy across the western hemisphere, then the Civil War threatened the very essence of the nation. From Whitman's perspective (a Northern, west-facing perspective), if the South were to win the Civil War, the continent would become fragmented along geopolitical lines. This fragmentation in effect dooms Whitman's hope for a unified, democratic America spanning from sea to sea.

Furthermore, the South for Whitman is only spatially located south of the North. Ideologically, it is much more closely aligned with the backwards East – Europe. As I mentioned earlier, Whitman criticizes Europe for being a “lair of slaves.” While slavery was not legal in most of Europe by the time Whitman wrote, he saw the oppression of the masses east of the Atlantic as a form of slavery. Whitman talks surprisingly little in his poetry about American slavery, but his attitude towards the oppression of working peoples extends all the more to slavery in the South. Martin Klammer argues that during the 1850s, Whitman developed a “deeply humanitarian concern for the suffering of slaves” (4), and thus an opposition to the system of slavery. Slavery for Whitman is basically the foundation of an aristocratic, borderline feudal economic system surviving in the American South. In “Walt Whitman and the South,” Andrew Hudgins notes that Whitman's prose writing make it clear that he sees the government

of the South as “aristocratic, anti-democratic, and, in short, everything that offended his concept of what a government should be” (98). For Whitman, that aristocratic stance links the spatial South to the ideological East; it progresses neither politically nor spatially westward. So for Whitman, a victory for the South means not only the threat of a fractured continent, but the threat of backwards, Eastern ideology dominating the Western world.

The deep anxiety Whitman felt about the fate of the country in the years before and during the Civil War comes through in *Drum-Taps*, a group of war poems originally published as a single volume in 1865. The most anthologized poems from *Drum-Taps* paint evocative scenes from the Civil War. “The Wound-Dresser,” “Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” and other poems describing the action of the Union army tend to be the most memorable of the collection. But those war sketches only make up a portion of *Drum-Taps*. The collection also includes a few poems that act as a call to arms (“Beat! Beat! Drums!” and “1861”) as well as a handful of poems that attempt to explain and justify the Union’s war on the South.<sup>3</sup> In particular, “From Paumanok Starting” and “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” employ the vision of America Whitman outlines in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to explain the relationship between the Civil War and manifest destiny.

“From Paumanok Starting” echoes the geographical survey of North America in “Song of Myself” and uses it to justify the Northern viewpoint and the Civil War. The poem’s speaker leaves Paumanok (the native name for Long Island, which Whitman tends to prefer) and flies

---

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, as Whitman incorporated *Drum-Taps* into *Leaves of Grass*, he rearranged the poems so that those justifying and calling for war precede the imagistic Civil War sketches. By 1871, the first third of *Drum-Taps* is a rallying cry for the remaining two-thirds, which more objectively document the conflicts of the Civil War.

“like a bird, / Around and around to soar to sing the idea of all” (*LG* 1892, 204). His flight path starts in New York and heads “To Kanada till I absorb Kanada in myself, to Michigan then, / To Wisconsin, to Iowa, Minnesota...to Ohio and Indiana,” and so on until he flies “up toward California” (204-205). The flight of the speaker in this poem follows the general pattern of Whitman’s survey of North America in “Song of Myself” – it starts in the northeastern U.S., goes up to Canada, down to the South, and then west to California. This is the path Whitman tends to take in his bird’s-eye views of the nation, and it reflects his view of America as a nation spreading democracy westward.

Even more significantly, Whitman uses this flight path to the West as a way to explain the need for the Civil War. Whitman concludes the poem by explaining that his purpose in flying over the nation is “To sing first (to the tap of the war-drum if need be), / The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable, / And then the song of each member of these States” (*LG* 1892, 205). While the states each have their own song, the “idea of all” takes precedence over the individuality of the states. Whitman thus espouses a thoroughly Northern viewpoint: the nation comprising the states is more important than the states themselves. His parenthetical statement also makes clear that this unity is the purpose for the war – “if need be,” the North will declare war on the South in order to maintain a unified (and implicitly westward-moving) nation.

Immediately following “From Paumanok Starting” is “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” a longer poem in which Whitman uses the cause of westward expansion to glorify the cause of the Civil War. “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” is one of Whitman’s rare poems with multiple

speakers, whose titles he places before each stanza in italic type. The poet, “the Bard of Manhattan” (*LG* 1892, 206) (presumably Whitman himself) looks up at a ship off the shore of Manhattan and observes a pennant and a banner flapping in the wind. These two symbols become speakers of the poem as well. The flag, “broad and blue...my starry banner” (207), represents the Union while the pennant represents the Union’s declaration of war on the South. The banner, being a symbol of America, represents the whole continent, including “the lumber forests of the North...the Southern plantation...California” (207). The poet defines the banner as “the Identity formed out of thirty-eight spacious and haughty States (and many more to come)” (207). Here again, Whitman reaffirms the unity of the United States while at the same time placing national identity over state identity. The poet, the banner, and the pennant are all on board with Whitman’s vision of the U.S. as an expanding North American empire. While the poem may be included in *Drum-Taps*, its multiple speakers are just as concerned with the fate of the nation in the West as they are with the South.

The other two speakers in “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” are a child and his father, who represent Northern anxieties about declaring war on the Confederate states. The child, seeing the pennant and banner flapping in the wind, tells his father, “I hear it – it talks to me – O it is wonderful!” (206). The child becomes ever more inspired by the pennant and the banner until he tells his father that “That pennant I would and must be” (208). The child fully embraces the cause of the Union in the Civil War and hopes to embody the necessary warlike nature of the North. The father, on the other hand, opposes war and tries to dissuade his child. He tells his child to “behold not banners and pennants aloft, / But the well-prepared pavements behold,

and mark the solid-walled houses” (207). The father prefers the material safety and security of peacetime to the lofty glory of war and expansion. He arises as the antagonist of the poem, with the banner and pennant impelling the poet to sing “This song to the soul of one poor little child” to convince him of the necessity of war. The father’s voice is ultimately drowned out as the poet ecstatically concludes, “I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so proud, with stripes, I sing you only, / Flapping up there in the wind” (209). The poem is a plea to moderate Northerners to embrace the Civil War, which aims to preserve “the Identity formed out of thirty-eight spacious and haughty States.” That identity, the same vision of America Whitman presents in his earliest poems, is crucial to the reasoning behind the Civil War; if we do not go to war, Whitman says, we may lose that vision and that identity.

*Drum-Taps* as it appears in the later editions of *Leaves of Grass* is much smaller than the original 1865 volume. In fact, every poem in *Leaves of Grass* written between 1861 and 1865 was published first in *Drum-Taps*, including “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” Gay Wilson Allen argues that *Drum-Taps* as a whole is the “most nearly metrical group of *Leaves of Grass*, because associated with martial emotions” (450). But even among the relatively metrical collection of poems, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” stands out as a formal poem among Whitman’s idiosyncratic free verse. So if the metricality of “Drum-Taps” matches its martial tone, then “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is the most thoroughly warlike poem of the bunch.

But of course, “Pioneers!” is warlike primarily in its form, not in its subject matter. Despite being published in “Drum-Taps” and despite its martial cadence, it is not actually *about*

the Civil War but rather about going west. The poem, in fact, is the most blatantly jingoistic poem Whitman wrote about manifest destiny:

All the pulses of the world,  
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,  
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers! (LG 1892, 170)

Whereas Whitman's early poems contain only an implicit tendency westward, "Pioneers!" clearly invokes the theory of *translatio imperii*. Whitman portrays America as the most recent of the westward-moving "pulses of the world," carrying out the project of advancing civilization forward through time and space. Whitman even says that "all the rest on us depend" (LG 1892, 168), that is, the unified democratic state in America is the savior of the whole world. Europe, Whitman says, is "wearied over there beyond the seas," so America must "take up the task eternal" (168). While the poem's form suggests war, its theme is the responsibility of Americans to move westward and spread democracy across the continent.

At the same time, Whitman also employs war imagery to advance the westward movement of the poem. From the first stanza onward, the poem clearly is a sort of war poem. In addition to the beating of drums and sounding of trumpets throughout "Pioneers!" Whitman also begins the poem by asking the pioneers to "Follow well in order, get your weapons ready, / Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp-edged axes?" (168). The poem is not so much about settling the West as it is about declaring a war of civilization on the uncivilized West. Of course, in the early 1860s when Whitman published the poem, war imagery would have been inseparable from the Civil War. The martial tones, rhythms, and images of "Pioneers! O



Pioneers!” are bound to the conflict occurring in the fractured eastern portion of the continent. While the poem contains no direct references to the Civil War, it bubbles up throughout the poem. Whitman tells his pioneers that “Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united” (170), again echoing the essential unity behind the North’s project of defeating Southern secession. Thus, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is not only the most blatant manifest destiny poem Whitman writes, but also the most blatant Civil War poem. America’s survival is contingent on winning two wars: the Civil War and the war on uncivilization.

If Whitman believes the Civil War and westward expansion are inseparable, what effect does that have on his mid-career poems that do not discuss the Civil War? Even beyond the poems in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman’s manifest destiny poetry in the 1860s both grows in volume and becomes increasingly conflicted in its attitudes about westward expansion.

Despite pro-manifest destiny war poems like “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” Whitman also writes many poems before and during the Civil War that express a marked skepticism of the nation’s romp westward. Henry Nash Smith provides an overview of Whitman’s shifting attitude towards U.S. westward expansion. While Smith’s overview is helpful on a broad scale, his look into Whitman’s work roughly from 1860 to 1867 oversimplifies Whitman’s westward-facing viewpoint. Smith argues that starting in 1860 with the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and extending beyond his Civil War poems, Whitman “adopted the theory of a westward course of empire, soon to culminate with the emergence of an American empire as a consequence of the American advance to the Pacific. This event closes the cycle of universal history” (379). Smith is largely correct; as I have already discussed, between 1860 and 1867, Whitman published

several of his most boosterish manifest destiny poems, including “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” But during this same period, Whitman also published several poems expressing skepticism of both the political and aesthetic ideologies behind westward expansion.

“Facing West from California’s Shores” suggests that as Whitman entrenched himself deeper in the ideology of manifest destiny, he also began to feel more ambivalent about his vision of American expansion in the western half of North America. The speaker of “Facing West” is a semi-mythical representation of all humanity looking out over the Pacific Ocean and contemplating the end goal of the supposed westward movement of civilization. The speaker sees himself at the end of a journey, “the circle almost encircled; / For starting westward from Hindustan...From Asia, from the North...From the South” (LG 1892,87), he has finally arrived at the endpoint in California. From all directions, humanity has ended in this culminating space. It seems, as Smith argues, that the significance of U.S. expansion to the West Coast becomes the end goal not only of the U.S. but of all human history. But despite the completion of this massive project, and despite the fact that the speaker is “very pleas’d and joyous,” he also questions the meaning and purpose of the journey. At the end of the poem, he asks, “But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?” (88). In this questioning of manifest destiny, the speaker becomes a skeptic. At the moment of its completion, manifest destiny’s purpose is “yet unfound.” All of human history is supposed to have led up to this point on the coast of California, but still the speaker has not found his ineffable goal. Contrary to Smith’s argument, Whitman seems to doubt whether there is an ultimate aim of civilization’s westward migration.

The subtle evolution “Facing West” undergoes between 1860 and 1867 further emphasizes Whitman’s growing ambivalence about manifest destiny. The poem first appeared in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* – the last before the Civil War. While the text remains largely the same between that edition and the post-war 1867 edition, a few key revisions augment Whitman’s skepticism of manifest destiny ideology. First, in the 1860 edition, “Facing West” is not an entire poem; it is merely section 10 of “Enfans d’Adam,” the precursor to the later, larger cluster of poems “Children of Adam” (LG 1860). So in the 1860 edition, the skeptical sentiment is buried near the bottom of a poem largely about sexuality and the body. As a very short section, it seems almost a footnote to the much longer, earlier sections of “Enfans d’Adam.” Until “Facing West” is set apart with its own title, it is only one component of a much larger work. Second, in the 1860 edition, the first line – and the eventual title – is completely omitted; the poem begins with its eventual second line, “Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound.” While the early version of the poem is clearly located on the West Coast of North America, its sense of place is only implicit. The poem’s final form, on the other hand, is primarily spatial; its title and first line stress the importance of California as a location for the speaker’s skeptical reflection. Finally, the last two lines – “(But where is what I started for so long ago? / And why is it yet unfound?)” – are set apart by parentheses in the later version of the poem where they were not parenthetical in the first draft. For Whitman, parentheses do not diminish the value of a line but in fact demarcate profound inward reflections.<sup>4</sup> By setting these lines apart with parentheses, Whitman expresses a serious inward doubt about the fate of

---

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most memorable line in “Song of Myself” is one of these introspective parenthetical statements: “(I am large, I contain multitudes).”

civilization. All of these subtle changes to “Facing West” – changes made over the course of the Civil War – more emphatically question the purpose of westward migration. Smith, analyzing only the first version of “Facing West,” claims that Whitman’s other poems are “strong enough to drown out the plaintive question, ‘Why is it yet unfound?’” (383). Perhaps if Smith considered the poem’s evolution, that doubt would not seem so easily outweighed by poems like “Pioneers! Oh, Pioneers!”

If “Facing West” questions what happens once manifest destiny has reached its westernmost limit, then “A Broadway Pageant” presents a possible answer: now that humanity has expanded as far west as it can, civilization’s movement will simply reverse itself, beginning with the arrival of Asian civilization in North America. Whitman wrote this poem in 1860 when ambassadors from Japan visited New York, and it first appeared in print in the 1865 edition of *Drum-Taps* (Smith 383). Whitman uses this actual visit from Japan to make a vast allegorical claim about the course of civilization. Whitman sees this visit as a symbol of the arrival of the entire Eastern hemisphere in America. “Not the envoys nor the tann’d Japanee from his island only,” Whitman says, but also “the Hindoo appears, the Asiatic continent itself appears” (178). The whole East, Whitman says, from Assyria to Polynesia, marches semi-metaphorically through the streets of Manhattan in an ostentatious pageant. This influx of Eastern cultures is a blatant reversal of the westward flow of manifest destiny.

As Whitman reveals at the end of the poem, the arrival of Asia in North America is ostensibly compatible with the westward flow of manifest destiny, in accordance with Smith’s claim that reaching the American West Coast “closes the cycle of universal history” (379). At

the end of the poem, Whitman writes that “The sign is reversing, the orb is enclosed, / The ring is circled, the journey is done” (*LG* 1892, 179). The natural result of manifest destiny’s success is that civilization turns around and goes the other way. Fortunately for Whitman’s pro-American ideology, he still finds a way to place the United States at the center of this reversal. The poem finishes with the conclusion that “They shall now also march obediently eastward for your sake, Libertad” (179). Libertad (Whitman’s nickname for America in this poem) benefits from and rules over the influx of the East. The North American continent is still at the ideological center of manifest destiny, even if its direction has shifted.

But Whitman’s language in “A Broadway Pageant” betrays his ideology. While the poem appears to be a prediction of civilization’s next step, he depicts Asian peoples, cultures, and lands as ancient and mystical, in typical orientalizing fashion. “The Originatress comes,” he announces, “The nest of languages, the bequeather of poems, the race of eld” (178). Whitman goes so far as to refer to the continent of Asia as “the past, the dead” (178). He later says that Confucius and other ancient poets are all there, marching down the streets of Manhattan in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Whitman’s vision of the East imported to the West does not merely reverse spatially; it also reverses temporally, diving back into ancient Asian history. Ultimately, the poem does not depict Asian civilization as the forward-looking next step of manifest destiny, but rather as a reversion to an earlier time and place transported mystically into the present. Instead of portraying a progression of manifest destiny, “A Broadway Pageant” rewinds and reshuffles westward expansion.

Furthermore, the precise location of “A Broadway Pageant” – Manhattan – calls into question Smith’s claim that the West becomes the geographical center of Whitman’s work in the 1860s. At the beginning of the poem’s second section, Whitman addresses “Superb-faced Manhattan,” saying that it is “To us, my city” (178) that Asia finally comes. The East is not moving itself gradually eastward across North America but is instead gravitating directly to New York, the largest city on the East Coast, the center of civilization in America (and, of course, Whitman’s beloved hometown). Smith claims that poems from this period of Whitman’s work place the American West above the East Coast, hailing California as the endpoint and culmination of civilization. But just as this poem does not look forward to an eastward-moving version of manifest destiny, it also does not look forward to the West as America’s final center. In both aesthetic and ideological terms, Whitman gives Manhattan a gravitational pull of civilization, contradicting his apparent emphasis on the West.

Not only does Whitman see thoroughly eastern and urban New York as the inevitable center of civilization in America, but he also finds the journey east to Manhattan an inescapable force on a personal level. For Whitman, though, the personal and national preferences are one and the same. In “A Promise to California,” first published in the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman promises to “travel toward you [California], to remain...For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, inland, and along the Western sea; / For these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will also” (*LG* 1892, 100). Here, as in other poems, Whitman aligns his own personal experience with the experience of the United States. Because the nation is moving west, so will he. I must also note that this poem is actually speaking from

an eastward-facing point of view. Along with his promise to California, he offers a sort of apology for “Sojourning east a while longer” (100). The purpose of addressing the West is not only to establish himself as a symbol of westward expansion, but also to assure California that though he faces east, he will soon face west. He has not yet committed to moving west, either on a personal or ideological level.

Thus, just as Whitman places Manhattan at the center of national identity in “A Broadway Pageant,” he also places it at the center of his personal identity. His preferential love for New York reaches a fever pitch in “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun.” The first section of this poem yearns for “a rural domestic life” in the Edenic land west of the Mississippi. Whitman employs romantic, agricultural imagery he commonly associates with the West – “juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard,” “a field where the unmow’d grass grows” – to describe the life he desires “on high plateaus west of the Mississippi” (*LG* 1892, 222). This western life is not only more rural than New York but also more peaceful and free. Whitman imagines the West as “a garden of beautiful flowers where I can walk undisturb’d.” From its center in the East, the first half of the poem longs for the West, representing it as a paradise to be preferred over the city life of New York. The second part of the poem, however, recoils violently eastward and wallows, like “A Broadway Pageant,” in the busy streets of Manhattan. Whitman writes that “you [Manhattan] hold me enchain’d a certain time refusing to give me up...I see what I sought to escape, confronting, reversing my cries” (223). As Whitman’s cries are reversed, so is the direction of the poem, as his yearning snaps like a rubber band back to the eastern city. “Keep your splendid silent sun,” Whitman bitterly tells the West, “Keep your

woods, O Nature...Keep your fields." What he once yearned for in a western, rural, agricultural life, he now rejects, opting instead for the "intense life, full to repletion and varied" (223) that Manhattan offers. "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," of course, is not blatantly a manifest destiny poem; it is much more about Whitman's personal preference for the East than about his ideological preference for the West. But because he asks readers of his 1860s poems to view him as an American symbol, this personal rejection of a western, rural life pairs with the eastward ideological movement in "A Broadway Pageant" to form a substantial eastward riptide to the general westward flow of Whitman's Civil-War era poems.

Whitman was certainly never a dissenting voice in the discussion of westward expansion in the United States. Over and over, his poems, like the nation and himself, tend westward towards the Pacific. But at least in the years during and around the Civil War, Whitman questioned and at times even contradicted the general movement west of his poetry. In fact, to simplify his views to one ideological standpoint discounts the implications of some of Whitman's best work, including the delightful mania of "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun." The messiness and ambivalence of Whitman's 1860s poems mirror national anxieties about the fate of the United States.

### **3. America as a Western power: capitalism, expansionism, and spatiotemporal transcendence (1867-1892)**

After the Civil War, the vision of America as a unified democratic nation spreading throughout North America becomes less of a concern as Whitman tries to determine the United



States' identity in a globalizing world. This second attitude shift in Whitman's career, beginning with the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, results from the outcome of the Civil War and the rise of capitalist market economy. For Whitman, the North's victory over the South meant the Union would be preserved, resolving the tension that led him to write increasingly conflicted poems about the nation's westward movement. He no longer had to worry about the fragmentation of North America. Furthermore, as Whitman was writing his most fervent manifest destiny poems, a few key western states entered the union, including Oregon, Kansas, Nevada, and Nebraska. With the vision of America as a continent-spanning nation coming into focus, Whitman had less reason to be concerned about the nation's spatial fate.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, Whitman's postbellum poetry mirrors national anxieties about coming of age in a globalizing, colonial world. During the 1870s and '80s, European powers were expanding their reach through colonization and industrialization. Stephanson argues that many Americans – presumably on Whitman's side – were concerned that if the U.S. bought into colonization, the nation would become too “European” or “Eastern” and fall into the backwards patterns of the Old World. Still, the nation saw itself as the leader of civilization, the inheritor of *translatio imperii*, so it had to develop somehow. As a result, Stephanson claims that in the postbellum period, the U.S. became “the most efficient economic juggernaut in the world, but one turned notably inward” (71). The nation colonized, but only on lands it already possessed – the states and territories of the Union – through growing industrialism and capitalism.

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, Whitman's vision of America was never actually achieved. Cuba and Canada never did join the United States, and the cession of Mexico stopped with the present-day American Southwest. Still, the westward movement to the Pacific Ocean became a concrete reality for the U.S. and Whitman.

Betsy Erkkila argues that in Whitman's mind, this inward-facing progress was not really preferable to expansionism. For Whitman, "If the Civil War had secured the political union, it had also secured a capitalist market economy that was making the political order of democracy no different from the feudal order of the past" (Erkkila 304). Erkkila points out that Whitman's prose during the 1870s and '80s was decidedly against laissez-fair capitalism because he saw it as a force that subjugated the masses by concentrating power in the hands of robber barons. The same force that (according to Stephanson) kept the nation from outward imperialism after the Civil War also oppressed Whitman's beloved population *en masse*. What, then, was Whitman to do? His nation's means of remaining the world's leading civilization reminded him of the oppression of the Old World, but the other option was geopolitical expansion beyond North America, another move that would align the U.S. with Europe. His response to this dilemma in his late-career poetry is two-fold: first, he glorifies the internal industrial development of the nation and justifies it by shifting oppression from the white American working class onto American Indians and the environment; and second, he glorifies metaphorical American expansion into the rest of the world through transcendental tropes arising from technological developments.

To understand Whitman's circuitous endorsement of capitalism and expansionism, we must first examine Whitman's evolution in two areas: nature and the "Indian Problem." Recent critics have condemned "Song of the Redwood Tree" for being problematic both in its ecological implications and its racist subtext. In the poem, Whitman accomplishes the complete internal colonization of Native peoples and the environment in California, which allows the

United States to extract natural resources and become a globally important economic force without being obviously imperialistic or “Eastern.”

It is no secret that one of Whitman’s foremost subjects is his relationship with nature. From his erotic descriptions of the ocean in “Song of Myself” to his communion with the mockingbird in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” to his dark, sublime musings on the cycle of life in “This Compost,” Whitman’s love of the natural world pervades his work. Influenced as he was by Emerson, this obsession is no surprise. Indeed, Whitman’s fascination with the West is due in large part to its vast expanses of untouched (or at least unsettled) nature. When Whitman took a trip west to Denver in 1879, the wild landscapes led him to proclaim, “I have found the law of my own poems” (*Specimen Days* 210). Whitman wrote that the “entire absence of art, untrammel’d play of primitive Nature – the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream” (*Specimen Days* 210) were the underlying inspiration for all his previous poetry. He worships nature, which fuels his obsession with the West.

But despite Whitman’s love of nature, he often views it – especially in the West – as a force to be conquered, developed and reaped rather than appreciated for its beauty. This tendency to view nature as a resource rather than as a thing in itself becomes clear in Whitman’s more jingoistic poems. For example, in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (to return once again to this poem as a centerpiece of Whitman’s west-facing work) Whitman argues that an important step of settling the American West is conquering and transforming its landscapes:

We primeval forests felling,  
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,  
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,

Pioneers! O Pioneers! (LG 1892, 169)

As Whitman grows more obviously imperialistic, he no longer views nature merely as something to be communed with, but something to be “pierced,” “upheaved,” and used. Whitman essentially endorses violence against nature for the sake of the nation’s westward expansion.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth is particularly hard on Whitman for “Song of the Redwood Tree” because it glorifies deforestation. Published in 1874 as one of his last major poems, “Song of the Redwood Tree” announces itself as “A California song” and describes a scene of loggers felling the majestic redwood trees of northern California. The poem has two speakers: a narrating poet and the voice of the personified redwood tree himself as he concedes his death. Killingsworth argues that the poem is ecologically problematic because the “great tree is made to submit willingly, even gladly, to the superior ‘race’ of human beings in their march westward” (66). The tree, as another speaker of the poem, repeats the refrain, “*Our time, our term has come,*” (LG 1892, 152), suggesting that its death and the accompanying destruction of habitat is simply the natural order of things, a yielding to the inevitable arrival of white “civilization” from the East. The tree feels no sorrow about its death but rather tells his fellow trees, “*Nor yield we mournfully majestic brothers,*” because they are dying for a cause: “*For them predicted long, / For a superber race*” (153). Whitman’s redwood tree is comfortable dying because he is making room for America to “*really shape and mould the New World, adjusting it to Time and Space*” (153). The death of the redwood here is one feature of U.S. westward expansion, an inevitable step in the course of history. In “Song of the Redwood Tree,” Whitman ultimately

abandons the attentiveness to nature he espouses in his early poems, opting instead to use nature as a resource for building the American empire.

“Song of the Redwood Tree” is just as problematic in its treatment of American Indians as it is in its treatment of the environment. For most of Whitman’s career, he pays little attention (positive or negative) to American Indians. In many cases, Whitman prefers the native names of American places to the imported European names. He consistently chooses Mannahatta over Manhattan and Paumanok over Long Island. He also spells Canada “Kanada,” to preserve its native, western image. But Whitman uses native names more for their assonance than out of respect for American Indians. In “Song of Myself,” he chants, “Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same” (*LG* 1855, 16). While the claim here is that native peoples and white Americans are equal, the line sticks out more because of its alliteration than because of its implications of equality. Whitman co-opts native names, but he essentially ignores native peoples throughout his poetry. Although he discusses race to some extent in “Song of Myself,” there is really only one passage that dwells on American Indians for more than a couple of lines. In this passage, Whitman recounts “the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far-west” where “the bride was a red girl” (*LG* 1855, 18). He goes on to describe a stereotypical depiction of the bride’s tribe, “crosslegged and dumbly smoking. . . . They had moccasins to their feet and large thick blankets hanging from their shoulders” (19). But Whitman only mentions this scene because it contains a white man – the trapper. The occasion for this scene among American Indians is the intermarriage of a white man into the tribe. American Indians, then, do not really have their own identity but exist in

relation to white Americans. Still, though, as Steven Blakemore and Jon Noble note, “Most of Whitman’s native representations are positive” (110), even if they are limited and presented only through a white lens.

Whitman’s faux-respectful erasure of American Indians persists throughout his career, but in “Song of the Redwood Tree,” he uncharacteristically becomes an apologist for the genocide of native peoples. Blakemore and Noble argue that Whitman aligns “the redwoods in the archetypal California forest with the demise of the ‘red’ race in America” (108). It is difficult not to notice the parallels between the redness of the redwoods and the “redness” of American Indians. Blakemore and Noble note that beyond the color of the trees, the redwoods in Whitman’s poem are portrayed as wild and savage, but also noble, stoic, and wise, matching stereotypical images of American Indians. If the redwoods in the poem are dying in order to pave the way for a globally competitive United States, then American Indians are dying for the same reason. If the poem is excusing ecological destruction, it is also excusing genocide. Native peoples, through the allegorical trees, are dying “*For them predicted long, / For a superber race*” (153). The use of the word “race” here makes the metaphorical reading of the poem almost more convincing than the literal reading. Whitman is essentially pardoning the genocide of American Indians by portraying them metaphorically as willing subhuman sacrifices, allowing the white race in America to take its place as the leader of the ever-expanding, westward-moving civilized world.

But why does “Song of the Redwood Tree” stick out so much as a racist and destructive poem? Although Whitman does not exactly have a clean slate in his land ethic and his race

relations, this poem is far more willing to justify genocide and environmental destruction than most of Whitman's work. But the double-edged destruction of native peoples and the environment serves a purpose in the poem: it refocuses the oppression of the white working class in the U.S. in order to justify the rising system of American industrial capitalism.

Concurrent with the deforestation of the redwood forests was what Whitman saw as the oppression of American workers in other industries. And while both necessarily benefit the U.S. as an economic force, Whitman was less invested in California's landscape and American Indians than he was in the wellbeing of the average white American worker. So when "The quick-ear'd teamsters and chain and junk-screw men" (*LG* 1892, 152) – presumably white, working class men – chop down the redwoods in "Song of the Redwood Tree," Whitman lifts up the American worker by giving him the role of carrying the nation's mission of manifest destiny forward. At the same time, he finds a way to justify the system of industrialization and capitalism that is in reality oppressing the worker in order to benefit the nation's economy. By shifting the oppression from the white working classes onto American Indians and pristine forests, he justifies the threatening internal colonization of the United States.

An equally important purpose of "Song of the Redwood Tree" is to find a way to make the United States an outward-facing economic power without adopting the oppressive, imperialistic tendencies of Europe. In section two of the poem, after the personified tree has surrendered to the hand of the white man, Whitman describes a scene of "Ships coming in from the whole round world, and going out to the whole world, / To India and China and Australia and the thousand island paradises of the Pacific" (154). The reason Whitman justifies the

destruction of the redwood habitat is to turn California into a center of trade, allowing the United States to compete among Western powers with economic but not geopolitical colonization. The shipping of the exports west across the Pacific reveals the purpose of the ecologically and racially problematic actions: to keep moving west beyond America's Pacific shores without European-style colonization. Capitalism aids in expanding the seemingly accomplished goal of reaching the Pacific Coast while also ensuring that the U.S. government does not occupy other lands as European powers are doing at the time.

If "Song of the Redwood Tree" expands manifest destiny's endpoint beyond North America, "Passage to India" takes an even more globalizing stance by metaphorically extending American democracy into the rest of the world. In "Passage to India," Whitman removes the spatiotemporal aspect of manifest destiny; it is no longer a simple movement west in North America, but a predestined global network of expansion arising from new technologies. The poem celebrates three almost simultaneous engineering feats that took place in 1869: the building of the Suez Canal, the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad, and the laying of transatlantic telegraph wires (Smith 385). To Whitman, these three technological innovations serve the ultimate goal of carrying manifest destiny forward into the rest of the world.

Whitman claims that "God's purpose from the first" is for "The earth to be spann'd, connected by network...The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near" (*LG* 1892, 286). While manifest destiny for most Americans had a particular religious tone, Whitman rarely engages in this aspect of westward expansion. Here, however, he invokes God to emphasize the interconnected globe as the final, pre-ordained phase of manifest destiny. The title "Passage to



India” hearkens back to Columbus’ project of finding a route west (as opposed to the then-conventional eastward route) to India from Europe. Indeed, Whitman exclaims ecstatically to Columbus, “Ah Genoese thy dream! thy dream! / Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave, / The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream” (287). Whitman sees the progress of technology as the answer to the total encircling of the world, the end goal of manifest destiny. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century engineering reassures him that civilization ought to continue advancing, not through American geopolitical action but through a growing network of American-style civilization.

The catch, of course, is that the poem actually describes two different passages to India – one westward and the other eastward. Whitman describes the route of the Union Pacific passing across the plains states and up the mountains of Nevada and California. He concludes:

...after all, in duplicate slender lines,  
 Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,  
 Tying the Eastern to the Western Sea,  
 The road between Europe and Asia. (286-287).

The Union Pacific railroad is one passage to India, and it follows the western route of civilization. Spanning the North American continent, the railroad becomes the western link between Europe and Asia, completing the mythical cycle of history Smith suggests. At the same time, though, Whitman is celebrating the completion of the Suez Canal. The canal is also a “road between Europe and Asia,” but it defies the westward course of empire, being an eastward route to the Eastern hemisphere.

Whitman sees “the Suez canal initiated, open’d” and concludes that indeed, the global interconnectedness achieved by engineering is about more than a geopolitical advancement

westward. "Passage to more than India!" he exclaims, finding in globalization a new, transcendent form of expansionism. Manifest destiny is no longer about the United States' spatial progression westward, but about personal, transcendent unity with the world. "O soul," he asks himself, "voyagest though indeed on voyages like these?" (291). The voyage into the world is no longer a Columbian act of civilization but rather a personal, spiritual journey. And suddenly, now that humankind has completed the passage to India, transcendence on earth is not enough; Whitman demands passage to the stars. "Sirius and Jupiter! / Passage to you! Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!" (291) he cries near the end of the poem. Literal westward expansion melts into a global network of expansion in every direction, which then gives way to a mystical, transcendent desire far beyond any literal expansionism. Smith notes that "It is toward this ultimate center [transcendence] rather than to any geographical destination that the poet and his soul set sail in 'Passage to India'" (389). The capitalism and imperialism underlying the building of the Union Pacific Railroad and the Suez Canal allow Whitman to conflate his manifest destiny ideology with the personal transcendence of poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

By turning manifest destiny into a literary device for transcendence, Whitman promotes American imperialism without literal implications for the United States' political role in the world. Just as "Song of the Redwood Tree" allows Whitman to circumvent the U.S.'s destructive domestic colonization, "Passage to India" places the nation in the playing field of other imperialistic "Eastern" powers without actually adopting their colonizing methods. Whereas Whitman's poems during the Civil War reflect the anxieties of the nation, his

postbellum poems deflect the anxieties about the political conundrum the nation finds itself in. He redirects the oppression inherent in the American breed of industrial capitalism that arises in the 1870s, and he engages in literary – but not literal – imperialism by conflating the dream of manifest destiny with personal transcendence and global harmony. Thus, Whitman uses the manifest destiny tropes from early in his career to fit the contemporary concerns of the nation.

## Conclusion

In the introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman tells his readers that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (iii). It is fitting, then, that as the “poem” of the United States evolved throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Whitman’s great poem, *Leaves of Grass*, changed with it. As the nation moved west to occupy a wider chunk of North America, Whitman wrote new territory into his book, making thicker and thicker with each new edition. As the nation’s scope expanded, so did Whitman’s body of work.

But the parallels between Whitman’s poetry and the “poem” of the United States go beyond physical size. When the United States plunged into the Civil War, Whitman changed the tone and subject matter of his poetry to reflect the deep anxieties about the fate of the American West. He became both a fervent nationalist and a reflective skeptic in his thinking on manifest destiny. When the nation’s economy boomed in the aftermath of the Civil War, Whitman again shifted the focus of his westward-moving poems in an effort to forge the United States’ role as a leader of civilization in a globalizing world.

The contradictions in Whitman's manifest destiny poetry reflect the divided views of the nation. His poetry about the West is at once enthusiastic and hesitant, racist and progressive, imperialist and isolationist. As Smith notes, Whitman's career "coincided with the apogee of the cult of Manifest Destiny" (377), so the deep conflict within Whitman's body of work helps us understand the tensions of 19<sup>th</sup> century American politics of space. Maybe Whitman was trying to capture the tensions and instabilities of the American national identity when he wrote perhaps his most memorable stanza:

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then, I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes). (*LG* 1892, 72)

Whitman contradicts himself – especially with respect to manifest destiny – because he is trying to contain multitudes, to embody the contradictions and tensions in American political thought about the West. *Leaves of Grass* is a log of Whitman's evolving views on U.S. westward expansion, which change to mirror the shifting political climate of the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Works cited

- Allen, Gay Wilson. "On the Trochaic Meter of 'Pioneers! O Pioneers!'" *American Literature* 20 (1949): 449-451. Web.
- Asselineau, Roger. "Nationalism vs. Internationalism in *Leaves of Grass*." *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman*. Ed. James Nagel. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1983. 320-327. Print.
- Blakemore, Steven and Jon Noble. "Whitman and 'The Indian Problem': the Texts and Contexts of 'Song of the Redwood Tree.'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*. 22 (2). Electronic.
- Erkkila, Betsy. *Whitman the Political Poet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. "The Fall of the Redwood Tree." *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*. University of Iowa Press, 2004. 48-73. Print.
- Klammer, Martin. *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. Print.
- Renner, Dennis K. "The Conscious Whitman: Allegorical Manifest Destiny in 'Song of Myself.'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 24. 149-155. Electronic.
- Smith, Henry Nash. "Walt Whitman and Manifest Destiny." *Huntington Library Quarterly*. Volume 10, issue 4. 373-389. Electronic.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass* (1892 edition). Peter Pauper Press: Mount Vernon, NY, 1974. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition). Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, 1968. Xerographic reprint.
- Whitman, Walt. *Specimen Days*. In *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall. New York: New York University Press, 1963. Print.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass* (1860 edition). In *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price, n.d. Web. September 22, 2014.