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Global Communication and Imperial Imaginings in Walt Whitman's Poems

This paper concentrates on the centrality of the notions of globality and communication in Walt Whitman's shaping of the discourse of the American empire in his poems. Whitman foregrounds, in his poetic writing, all sorts of interconnections – between individuals, communities, races, nations, traditions, religions, etc. – and thus he interrogates the existing cultural and political hierarchies, and concomitantly, in constructing a unique and distinct rhetoric, characterized by a strong authorial presence, the poet unequivocally points to himself as the one who decides about the terms of presenting such interconnections. It goes without saying that Whitman identifies himself with the American nation as much as he does with the entire human kind, therefore he carries with him the national legacy wherever his imagination takes him. Indeed, the poetic imagination is a key concept here because it is seen as a way to facilitate the shifts and to create the parallels between the reality which is perceived and the reality which is invented, between tangible political doctrines and imaginary political designs, between local happenings and global processes. The ways in which certain imperial notions function in Whitman's poems illustrate the dual contextualization – with regard to America's past and present, on the one hand, and to the universal human experience, on the other – which allows the poet to explore historical contingencies and transcend them with equal easiness.

One of the most important tendencies in recent Whitman scholarship is to probe the poet's involvement with American politics as revealed in his poetic discourse, in particular his forms of support for the U.S. expansionist policy. For example, Betsy Erkkila stresses the continuity between Whitman's early journalism, which articulated an unrelenting endorsement of the American Western expansion, and the poems in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, wherein “the representation of ‘the other’... – whether as the West, nature, the Indians, Mexico, the People, or the soul itself – is made to serve the jealous and passionate instinct of American – and specifically imperial – policies and ‘standards’” (61). This article demonstrates how Whitman evokes the concepts and strategies that inform his expansionist discourse to talk about a process which, in comparison with U.S. expansionism, is far less plausible, but no less desirable, namely American leadership on the global scale. As Edward Said writes: “Just as none of us is

outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (6).

Whitman scholars almost unanimously agree that the Civil War marks a caesura in the development of the poet’s personal ideology and in his use of literary means, although, as James Perrin Warren warns us, the critical view that “[i]f the prewar style represents Whitman at his best, then the twenty-seven years of his postwar writing should be read as a story of decline and failure” (45), leads to simplifications. Warren defines this caesura in stylistic terms, distinguishing Whitman antebellum “revolutionary” style from his post-bellum “evolutionary” style. The primary difference between these two stylistic and ideological structures is that, in the latter, the vision of America is accompanied by a far greater awareness of its roots in the past. Characteristically, the crucial continuity between the two styles and visions is the figuration of America as “the principal actor in the world’s cultural drama” (48). This is precisely the kind of continuity that this article highlights. In keeping with Amy Kaplan’s general postulate that “United States nation-building and empire-building” be seen as “historically coterminous and mutually defining” (17), the article demonstrates that the presence of what John R. Eperjesi calls “the imperialist imaginary” constitutes a permanent feature of Whitman’s poetic vision, as if the rhetoric of empire alone provided a compensation for his political uncertainties. Accordingly, the poems illustrating the present argument come from different periods in Whitman’s career.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes that imperialism, defined as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of the dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory,” is “impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination” (8, original italics). Accordingly, the people, who, in various ways, helped to build the great Western empires, were motivated not only by “profit and hope of further profit” (9), but also by:

a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation, which, on the one hand allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples. (10, original italics)

Said talks about two nineteenth-century European imperial powers, Britain and France, and his observations are not fully relevant with regard to the American context, never-

theless, they shed light on the ways in which Whitman envisages himself as the one who embodies and articulates American national aspirations and even dreams. First, Said presents imperialism as a political initiative that provides a response to a certain existing state of things; it can be said that an imperial power possesses the potential that must necessarily be used elsewhere. There is, so to speak, the idea of invitation in such a view of imperial duties, which is very much in keeping with Whitman's imaginings. Second, Said identifies a psychological mechanism that makes people see their participation in the project of empire as a manifestation of "a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule," which is precisely how Whitman conceives of American global leadership. However, the American poet does redefine the goal of imperial endeavors: in a self-contradictory manner, he wants to rule without subjugating others, without letting them feel their inferiority.

One of the symptomatic features of Whitman's discourse of empire is the presence of naval imagery, with the ship as a figurative representation of the American expansive spirit. In the short poem "The Ship Starting" (1865), included in "Inscriptions," the poet attributes to the ship such qualities as energy and dynamism, on the one hand, and pride and majesty, on the other: "The pennant is flying aloft as she speeds she speeds so stately – below emulous waves press forward" (174). Setting sail appears to be an activity resulting from an internal urge, aroused and intensified by the view of "the unbounded sea" (173). Characteristically, Whitman does not define the destination, as if the destination mattered less than the very process. In a sense, he envisages American ships going everywhere and nowhere in particular at the same time, notwithstanding the occasional meticulous enumerations of geographical names, most notably in "Salut au Monde!" (1856). Such a figuration of American expansiveness attests to a certain solipsistic condition as a factor behind the project of empire. In an article on Emerson and American continental expansionism, Jenine Abboushi Dallal observes that "[a]t its height in the nineteenth century, expansionism was represented as an abstract, tautological, and domestic process, not a corporeal encounter with rivals over land" (50). Furthermore, she writes that "U.S. expansion organizes the encounter of the United States with itself – its own destiny; the ideology admits no dialectic and no Other, which accounts for the rhetoric's self-referentiality and opacity" (54). A similar focus on the national destiny, with regard to both continental expansion and global influence, can be found in Whitman's poems. Interestingly, in the representation of domestic policies, the poet's discourse foregrounding the nation's special destiny helps to gloss over the facts of ruthless land acquisition, while in the vision of America as the world's leader it ignores the difficulty of translating American imperial fantasies into a tangible political program. Evidently, Whitman magnifies American

possibilities to such great proportions that his poetic program reaches far beyond the existing political doctrines.

Needless to say, Whitman constructs the kind of rhetoric that allows him to harmonize political realities and imaginary prospects. A good illustration of how he annuls the apparent discrepancies between the two realms is the following passage from "Starting from Paumanok" (1860), the poem distinguished by an extended presentation of America:

Yet upon the plains west of the spinal river, yet in my house
of adobie,

Yet returning eastward, yet in the Seaside State or in
Maryland.

...

Yet sailing to other shores to annex the same, yet welcoming
every new brother,

Hereby applying these leaves to the new ones from the hour
they unite with the old ones,

Coming among the new ones myself to be their companion
and equal, coming personally to you now,

Enjoining you to acts, characters, spectacles, with me. (186)

The vision of the varied American nation smoothly turns into the vision of a rather enigmatic unification of "the new ones" and "the old ones." Not surprisingly, Whitman emphasizes the personal dimension of this process, the sign of which is the strong personal bond between the poet and his addressee. This closeness between individuals ultimately guarantees that general equality will remain a fundamental principle. However, the poet's categorical statement of his intention of "[e]njoining you to acts, characters, spectacles, with me," clearly suggests that the one to whom these words are directed does not really have much choice but to accept the course of events triggered off by the coming of the poet. Additionally, this passage implies the continuous nature of American expansionism; in other words, once the continental expansion has been completed the annexation of "other shores" will be a natural and logical corollary. It is, indeed, characteristic of Whitman's poetic vision that the act of annexation is accompanied by a gesture of brotherly embrace. In "Starting from Paumanok," he presents expansion as a cosmic law which has multifarious manifestations:

Expanding and swift, henceforth,

Elements, breeds, adjustments, turbulent, quick and audacious,

A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,
A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with
 new contests,
New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions
 and arts. (186-187)

The poem leaves no doubt that this new domineering race is the American nation. In section 16 of “Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman prophesies that what will remain of “the past” will be names, just like the names of Indian origin on the map of America, which are often the only trace of the former existence of the Natives:

The red aborigines,
...
Leaving such to the States they melt, they depart, charging
 the water and the land with names. (186)

This is probably the closest Whitman ever gets to talking about the extermination of Indians. He evokes a conveniently elegiac picture of Native Americans:

Native Americans, unlike the subdued populations of the British Empire, always fell under the sign of extinction, and thus almost posed less a nagging problem than an ideological benefit. Commiserating over the Indian inexorable demise, and looking toward newly opened territories, reminded white Americans that they were, after all, the race of the future. (Harvey 243)

The point is that, for Whitman, this picture, well-entrenched in the cultural production of the day and most notably developed in Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, has a broader significance. Namely, faced with “the future of the States... glad and sublime” (186), all other “races” are bound to follow the example of the “red aborigines,” which means that they can either “melt” or “depart.”

The ocean features prominently in Whitman’s imperial imaginings as a space of connections; thus, in “Song of the Exposition” (1871), the poet envisages “This earth all spann’d with iron rails, with lines of steamships threading every sea” (348), and in “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd” (1865), included in “Children of Adam,” he metaphorically depicts the ocean as a realm of affectionate relations: “I too am part of that ocean my love, we are not so much separated, / Behold the great rondure, the cohesion of all, how perfect!” (263). The ocean signifies both boundlessness and closeness;

it naturally brings people together because it erases boundaries. In other words, the ocean annihilates distances. On the one hand, it is a powerful, determining force that accelerates historical processes, on the other, it reflects the poet's potential and anxiety: "You oceans that have been calm within me! how I feel you, fathomless, stirring, preparing unprecedented waves and storms" (187). In conditioning the essential course of the world as well as the great possibilities of the human kind, the ocean signifies the necessity of certain attitudes and activities and the irreversibility of certain processes. The ocean plays a significant role in global communication of which the poet is an agent. In the poem "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea" (1871) from "Inscriptions," the expansive ocean defines the territory which the poet aims to explore; in the meaningful line that reads: "The tones of unseen mystery, the vague and vast suggestions of the briny world, the liquid-flowing syllables" (166), he compares the sea water to the medium of poetry. Furthermore, Whitman combines the view of "cabin'd ships at sea" with the vision of his book: "Speed on my book! spread your white sails my little bark athwart the imperious waves" (166). He uses corresponding words to talk about the ships at limitless sea and the poems in the global space. This figuration is somewhat paradoxical because it highlights both the materiality of poetry, which "speeds on" and "sails on," and its liquidity: "bear o'er the boundless blue from me to every sea" (166). The characteristic logic underlying the combination of the oxymoronic concepts of materiality and liquidity results from the designation of the poet as the source of all meanings. It is in this figure that the meanings and the terms of conveyance originate. Needless to say, the poet has a privileged position in Whitman's poetry for two primary reasons: first, he enjoys the full mastery of "one common orbic language" (348), and second, he is a leading representative of America, "holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating all" (348).

Malini Johar Schueller explains Whitman's method of reconciling apparently contradictory ideas on the basis of his rhetoric of the Orient, which smoothly links the notions of colonialism and liberation:

The idea of the strong 'representative man' vigorously striding across countries, creating his own order, clearly echoes Emerson's laudatory biographies. But in Whitman's formulation the representative man had to also be the common, average citizen, who, because he embodied democracy, was always a threat to monarchic privilege. He made tyrants tremble and crowns become unsteady. That this populist representative man is also a colonizer with unlimited power over the natives is not seen as a contradiction. But Whitman could present colonialism as democracy only by dissociating it from questions about the freedom of Asians and other people of color. The narrative both resists and reifies this dissociation. Within the discourse of colonialism as eman-

cipation, the narrative of the godlike representative man exploring Africa is oddly ahistorical. However, as a mystification of the issues of slavery and power, the trope of exploration, thematized most often as freedom, works well. (180)

Schueller further argues that Whitman uses “a strategic language of political innocence” and she recognizes the following features of this political innocence: “earthy male[ness],” “an omnivorous appetite,” and “a desire to embrace all.” The critic describes Whitman’s poetic persona as “a nonchalant, amative self” and concludes that “while the imperialistic implications of this loving, embracing self are clear, the very idea of the nation as a lover necessitates us viewing it as a subject that necessarily derives its identity from interaction with the Other” (181).

The question arises as to the nature of the interaction with the Other, and by extension, as to the quality of global communication. First of all, communication is a process that parallels expansion insofar as it is characterized by an outward direction; in other words, when Whitman writes about ships, he envisages their departures, not returns, and analogically, when he writes about the poet’s encounter with the Other, he emphasizes the act of conveying messages rather than receiving them. In “Salut au Monde!,” the poem known for extended and detailed geographical catalogues – which Eric Wertheimer reads as Whitman’s “most blissful enunciation of global identities (165), while John P. McWilliams, by contrast, tellingly calls them “the absurd machinery” (233) – the poet, who has virtually circled the whole earth, meaningfully states: “I have look’d for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands” (296). The persona’s assertion that he has found “equals and lovers” far and wide glosses over the implication of their passivity. The fact that the speaker is the source rather than the target of communication does not mean that he remains ignorant of the legacy of alien cultures. Quite on the contrary, he has a privileged cognitive status as the one who perceives and comprehends things first. In “Salut au Monde!,” the significance of cognition of which the poet is the subject is highlighted in the anaphoric sequences beginning with “I hear” and “I see.” The point is that the speaker hears and sees what he wants to, and not what others might expect him to. Thus, the essential condition of communication is a temporary co-presence but not a prolonged exchange; the reason for this is a large disproportion between the scale of America’s contribution to the general progress of the mankind and the extent of other nations’ contributions, which rather belong to the past. David Simpson argues that Whitman does not recognize the Other as “having different needs or interests” and forecloses the space for debate, therefore he does not have to worry about the consequences of “actions and words.” Simpson writes: “Whitman’s capacity to remain totally unaware of any difference between self and other marks him out as the

voice of manifest destiny, and of the most confident period of nationalist enthusiasm” (192). Tenney Nathanson’s description of Whitman’s addressee as “anonymous, generic... [and] defined by the participation in the codified transmission activated by the signature” (320) perfectly applies to the way the poet positions the Other in his writing.

The primary act of good will that America performs for the sake of other nations is remembrance, as Whitman makes it clear, for example, in the poem “Unnamed Lands” (1860), from “Autumn Rivulets,” where he writes:

Nations ten thousand years before these States, and many
times ten thousand years before these States,
Garner’d clusters of ages that men and women like us grew
up and travel’d their course and pass’d on,
What vast-built cities, what orderly republics, what pastoral
tribes and nomads,
What histories, rulers, heroes, perhaps transcending all others,
What laws, customs, wealth, arts, traditions,
What sort of marriage, what costumes, what physiology and
phrenology,
What of liberty and slavery among them, what they thought
of death and the soul,
Who were witty and wise, who beautiful and poetic, who
brutish and undevelop’d,
Not a mark, not a record remain – and yet all remains. (499)

Whitman’s imperial logic is expressed in a symptomatic way in the closing lines of “Salut au Monde!,” where the idea of the equality of nations is replaced by a new hierarchy of nations:

Toward you all, in America’s name,
I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,
To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men. (297)

The poet’s commanding voice and overwhelming gesture evidently preclude any possibility of discord. As Betsy Erkkila puts it, “[t]he paradox of Whitman’s poetic democracy is that, at the very moment when he seeks to be most inclusive, universal, and democratic, his poetry becomes most powerful – and most powerfully dangerous – in silencing and denying the rights, liberties, and differences of others” (57).

Among the kinds of imagery that substantiate Whitman's imperial imaginings, technology plays a crucial role. *Leaves of Grass* as a whole can be seen as an example of what David E. Nye calls "the technological foundation story" (4). Essentially, the narratives of technological foundation depicted the processes of community-building on newly acquired territories, and thus they complemented the narratives of regeneration through violence. As Nye puts it, in foundation stories, the "dramatic action focuses on transforming an uninhabited, unknown, abstract space into a technologically defined place" (3-4), or in other words, on "creating society by applying new technologies to the physical world" (4). The invariable feature of the narratives of technological foundation was the attribution of important symbolic senses to certain man-made objects of general use which, in specific ways, corresponded to the successive stages in the establishment of human settlements in what used to be the wilderness. Nye mentions the following objects and constructions that acquired such symbolic significance: "the axe, used to create the log cabin and the clearing; the mill, the center of new communities; canals and railroad, used to open western lands to settlement; irrigation, which converted worthless desert into lush farmland" (4). Characteristically, because of their causal and sequential logic, the narratives of technological foundation helped to understand history as well as destiny, providing the inhabitants of new settlements in particular, and the whole nation in general, with a sense of being anchored in the past and of having a great task to accomplish in the present or the future. According to Nye, technological foundation stories produced a false idea of the essentially multifarious historical developments in reducing "a complex set of actions and experiences to an apparently simple assertion of facts" (4). The persistence of such stories resulted, on the one hand, from the adoption of the nostalgic tone to talk about obsolete technologies, and on the other, from the easiness of creating the imagery representing the new ones. As Nye observes, "[w]hen new, each technology represented a sudden increase in power. In retrospect, each is diminished" (19), becoming "naturalized" as an existing element of the environment transformed by changing technologies. It goes without saying that Whitman's poems contain numerous depictions of the national technologies and of the transformations of the land, the best single illustration of which is undoubtedly "Song of the Broad Axe" (1856).

In Whitman's poems, the narrative of technological foundation has a national as well as a global dimension. The transformation of America precedes the transformation of the entire world. The connections between America and distant territories have been strengthened as a result of the application of new technologies, most notably by the telegraph, to which Whitman makes repeated references. For example, in "Salut au Monde!," he writes: "I see the electric telegraphs of the earth, / I see the filaments of the news of the wars, deaths, losses, gains, passions, of my race" (290). Admittedly, the

figure of “the electric telegraphs of the earth” expresses Whitman’s ideal of global connections. Furthermore, the imaginary network thus created can be seen as the earliest historical variant of what Arjun Appadurai calls “technoscape,” that is the fluid “global configuration... of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speed across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (325). In Appadurai’s view, technoscapes, alongside ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, financescapescapes and ideoscapescapes, constitute the modern global cultural economy (324-326).

Whitman envisages the transmission of information on the largest possible scale as an inevitable phenomenon defining the special moment in history. The telegraph provides the medium not only for disseminating the news about defeats and victories, but also for sharing experiences of fundamental existential significance. Accordingly, the news, spread worldwide by means of recent technologies of communication, highlights particular events and concomitantly testifies to the continuity of historical processes and the lasting quality of universal laws. In “Song of the Exposition,” Whitman celebrates the technological inventions and constructions which epitomize the “triumphs of our time”:

With latest connections, works, the inter-transportation of
the world,
Steam-power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum,
These triumphs of our time, the Atlantic’s delicate cable,
The Pacific railroad, the Suez canal, the Mont Cenis and
Gothard and Hoosac tunnels, the Brooklyn Bridge [...] (348)

In “Passage to India,” the poem composed around the same time as “Song of the Exposition,” Whitman once more pays tribute to the three great symbolic achievements of his age: the Pacific railroad, the Suez canal, and the Atlantic cable. What is worth noticing about both “Song of the Exposition” and “Passage to India” is an intense feeling of excitement that the very awareness of the existence of such advanced means of transport and communication arouses in the poet. The possibility of reaching the farthest corners of the globe bestows meaning on his idea of purpose.

Whitman has so much enthusiasm for the new technologies of communication because they reduce distances, for example through shortening the amount of time needed for the circulation of information or through making space appear to have shrunk. The idea of reduced distances harmonizes with the notion of the American imperial mission insofar as it facilitates the establishment of relations of scale between America and the rest of the globe and the emergence of new political hierarchies. In “Salut au Monde!,” Whitman writes:

I see a great round wonder rolling through space,
 I see diminute farms, hamlets, ruins, graveyards, jails,
 factories, palaces, hovels, huts of barbarians, tents of
 nomads upon the surface,
 I see the shaded part on one side where sleepers are
 sleeping, and the sunlit part on the other side,
 I see the curious rapid change of the light and shade,
 I see distant lands, as real and near to the inhabitants of
 them as my land is to me. (289)

While the extensive and continuous geographical catalogues suggest an impressive scope of vision, the poem, in fact, presents the world in miniature. Like the mythological figure of Atlas, Whitman's poet alone is larger than the Earth. Everything that his vision encompasses is "diminute." In the rapid succession of geographical names, very special places lose their uniqueness; as Walter Grünzweig observes, "[i]n their utilitarian compactness, these catalogues erase cultural differences and, through their very form, subject non-Western (or even non-Anglo-Saxon) cultures to Western standards" (304). The world outside the poet shrinks, while the world within him expands: "Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens" (287); "Within me zones, seas, cataracts, forests, volcanoes, groups" (288). Obviously enough, such statements are imaginative constructions, but their spatial denotations create the impression of concrete, physical experience and thus legitimate the political program voiced by the speaker. Whitman talks about "a great round wonder rolling through space," employing an anaphoric structure that predominates stylistically in the poem, wherein several long sequences have lines beginning with "I see." In this way, the diminute world functions as a projection of the poet's mind and, at the same time, as an object of sensory perception. An equally meaningful example of Whitman's concretization of the imperial experience despite the use of figurative concepts is the act of incarnating the world by the poet: "Within me is the longest day, the sun wheels in slanting rings, it does set for months" (288). In other words, the speaker accomplishes what might be called a bodily annexation of the entire globe.

The poet's gesture of appropriation facilitates the articulation of the greatness of America; in "Song of the Exposition," Whitman thus prophesies:

Around a palace, loftier, fairer, ampler than any yet,
 Earth's modern wonder, history's seven outstripping,
 High rising tier on tier with glass and iron facades,
 Gladdening the sun and sky, enhued in cheerfulest hues,

Bronze, lilac, robin's-egg, marine and crimson,
 Over whose golden roof shall flaunt, beneath thy banner
 Freedom,
 The banners of the States and flags of every land,
 A brood of lofty, fair, but lesser palaces shall cluster. (344-345)

Indeed, it is quite generous of Whitman to say that around America, envisioned as “a palace, loftier, fairer, ampler than any yet,” “lesser palaces shall cluster,” while he implies that everything pales down in comparison with America, everything becomes inadequate. Images of superabundance recur in Whitman's descriptions of his nation's potential: “interminable farms,” “limitless crops,” “the endless freight-train,” “incalculable lumber,” “the inexhaustible iron” (349). In the short late poem entitled “The United States to Old World Critics” (1888), America becomes epitomized in the figure of “solid-planted spires tall shooting to the stars” (628). In the light of Whitman's figurations of America's magnitude, the nation's imperial project acquires self-justification.

David Marr writes that “Whitman's theory of history posits three stages: (a) the pre-American, feudal ‘ecclesiastical, dynastic world,’ encompassing ancient and medieval civilizations both east and west; (b) the American or modern and increasingly democratic, materialistic stage; and (c) the spiritualized democratic and imperial stage” (81). What undermines this view of the progressive course of history is that while the first two stages distinguished by Whitman are grounded, to a greater or lesser extent, in facts of the past and present, the final one, marking the ultimate point in human history, finds substantiation in the poetic vision exclusively. It is only in his imagination and, subsequently, in his rhetoric that Whitman can resolve or dismiss the tensions resulting from the very existence of national imperial plans, and deny the injustices inevitably entailed in the process of realizing such aspirations.

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