

Morality of Identity: Whitman in Chamoiseau and Glissant

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The transcendentalist movement in nineteenth-century American literature, in retrospect, surrounds identity politics. Take Walt Whitman and his most famous poem, “Song of Myself,” as an example—its central theme is thinking about the self in relation to others or, more accurately, how differences with others reveal meanings about the “I.” This question underlies many political conflicts and has, in recent years, been brought to a more explicit form as a resurfacing nativist immigration policy—the border wall—strictly prohibits exchanges between the self and non-self, Americans and non-Americans. Martinique writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant echo a critique of this nativism as they denounce the establishment of the Ministry of Identity in France and advocate for a more fluid conception of identity in their 2018 essay “When the Walls Fall: Is National Identity an Outlaw?” They define identity as an unfixable and ever-changing “being-in-the-world” which would be rendered lifeless by the confinement of rules (260).

By its nature, one’s identity has an unstable duality which “infuses in the relationship with the other and with the world, while it also results from this relationship” (260). Threatened by otherness, emerging nations compact their communal values—their national identities—into symbols in an attempt to retain their “purity,” and force their identities onto others. Colonialization, with its apparent purpose of economic exploitation, cannot exist without this “overvaluation” on national identity (260), or rather, the “wall of identity” (263). Chamoiseau and Glissant argue that as a “forged tool of defense” (261), the wall is exclusive to mentally insecure, threatened, repressive, and so-called democratic nations. The “wall of identity” betrays the very foundation of identity being one created in relation to another, needing “such a contact

and such an exchange” (263). Indeed, Chamoiseau and Glissant point out that conquerors are also “secretly conquered” in their ignorance of how interactions open identities to flow and exchange (264).

An apparent functioning of this “relational identity,” however unconscious it may be, is undeniable in the world today, too (265). National and individual identities are interdependent, flourishing through exchanges that “enrich[es] oneself in the highest sense of the term” while not losing one’s individuality (267). Chamoiseau and Glissant plead against the outdated labels of “diversity,” such as skin color, language, or birthplace, and argue that genuine diversity can only exist in the “imaginary,” such as art, music, and literature (265). The conscious imaginary stops the misrepresentation of otherness through “thinking of oneself, thinking of the world,” and “thinking of oneself in the world” (265). Furthermore, one’s distinct identity is still preserved, but enriched by this exchange. Despite the uncertainty that comes with the coexistence of different identities, the fear of losing one’s individuality cannot propel the establishment of a law of “mandated blending” through a “claimed transparency of the nation’s culture” (267) and an “arrogant pride of bearing the truth” (266). These fabricated axioms of refusing the “other” destroy the sanctity of identity, of an experience that is humanity.

Using Chamoiseau and Glissant’s conception of identity, I examine American poet Whitman’s vision of democracy in “Song of Myself,” which emphasizes the exchange of the self with its surroundings. I argue that that the poem is an irresponsible appropriation of identities. Whitman disguises his refusal to truly engage with otherness and his egotistic conqueror mentality with a perverted image of equality, in which nothing has actual value. He “celebrates” himself for having this vision of equality (Whitman 63), and uses it to “become” (102) and “possess” (66) all otherness while reducing all others into his sensual worldview. With a lengthy

epithet of himself, “turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,” Whitman claims that he is a “kosmos” in and of himself through his restless transactions with others (86), which allegedly “tend inward” and “outward” with each other (79). His reiteration of “I,” declaration of himself as the “sign of democracy” (87), undertone of claiming his view as the absolute truth, and glaring pride of how he easily adopts others point to the “overvaluation” of his self-identity.

Formally, his portrayal of exchanging himself with the non-self is what world-of-identity or, as Chamoiseau and Glissant terms, “tout-monde,” should look like (Chamoiseau and Glissant 262). However, all of his interactions with the other are superficial; none of the scenes Whitman depicts “enriches” his identity in a substantive or meaningful way. Others, such as Black men and nature, are always deprived of their histories and exist as transient fragments that only serve to glorify his own perception and sentience. Whitman’s emptying of others’ identities justifies him to make them his property. Without a genuine awareness of his relation to others, Whitman fails to achieve what Chamoiseau and Glissant hope the imaginary can do in poetry.

As he overvalues his identity, Whitman creates a “wall of identity.” Lacking a deeper understanding of the other, Whitman cannot discern any value in an exchange with a different identity. He appropriates the meaning of equality into one without morality; “vice” and “virtue” are equally devoid of value (Whitman 85). He cannot see any value of the other besides what is the most obvious, so he calls this indifference or rather, “wall of identity,” equality. The wall is fortified through his “sensuality,” which is but the eroticization and exoticization of all otherness. To bedazzle the audience with his bombastic perspective, he sensualizes his surroundings and glorifies his “fleshiness.” His exoticization of the other only functions as the pedestal of his self-celebration and unquenchable thirst to possess others, to secretly strengthen the wall between them. The greatest irony, as Chamoiseau and Glissant criticize of colonization, is that

Whitman, the conqueror, only dominates others in his imaginary, while in his superficial transactions with others, he is also conquered. Unknowingly, his identity is erased as he erases others’.

Disregarding true substances of identities, Whitman projects his prurience onto his view of the world and declares this view absolute. He instructs the audience to live in the present and to see the world as he does:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and
 Increase, always sex,
 Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life

To elaborate is no avail, learn’d and unlearn’d feel that it is so. (65)

Whitman recognizes an inextricable “knit,” the relational aspect of identity in his poem, but he lacks a willingness to truly engage with the other. A genuine exchange with the world requires an elaboration of relations, to think of oneself with another, but to him, “to elaborate is no avail.” He does not think, either, but merely “feels” the relation. Seeing different identities as only a reflection of “always sex” and “a breed of life,” Whitman reduces all others to a restless carnality. All that he “learns” from the other is the fact of sexual reproduction. He insists that to “feel,” one will know that “it is so,” as if his perception is somehow universal, that his flimsy understanding of the world is the correct viewpoint.

Conflating seeing and feeling into an exchange with others, Whitman assumes and becomes others without understanding their identities. Seeing is not believing, nor is it becoming, but he appropriates his excruciatingly detailed vision of a slave into a false becoming:

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of thee dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marks-
 men,
 I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thin’d with the ooze of my skin
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,

Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become
the wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe. (101-2)

Although Whitman sees the “hell,” “despair,” taunting “riders,” and violence inflicted on the slave, he disregards the injustice in this scene and the responsibility to care about others. We do not even know the name of the slave, as if the one slave he sees is representative of everyone. He only cares to transcribe and sensualize the “gore” and “ooze” of others’ pain. Cultures and experiences of the other are trivialized as he idly “lean[s] on a cane and observe[s].” Even the slave’s painful experiences are merely Whitman’s “changes of garments,” as if they can be easily removed from identities. Like the “riders” who “taunt” the slave, Whitman taunts the real slave by falsely claiming his or her identity and appropriating the slave’s experience. The cruelties of slavery are used as animating details and aesthetic accessories to “enrich” his poem but not his identity. The other is exoticized and degraded into “garments” at his disposal. He audaciously assumes the bruises, the “livid,” of others as he “lean[s]” and “observe[s],” all while shamelessly declaring that he does not have to “ask the wounded person how he feels” to truly exchange with the wounded person. While leaving out the moralities of the other’s experiences, he creates a greater mystification of the other and prides himself on this shallow observation. Moralities of sufferings constitute others’ identities and need to be parsed out and explicated, not to be irreverently assumed by another like Whitman. In his corrupt imagination, he also fails to recognize how real sufferings can shape his identity.

Whitman’s exoticization of the other and simultaneous self-glorification is evident in his descriptions of nature and another Black man, whose name we also do not learn. Whitman hides

the indecency of his appropriation under the claim that he “cannot accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms,” while he “gives the sign of democracy” (87). He describes how he sees “the sun” reflecting “the black of / his polish’d and perfect limbs” and “the ample neck and breast” of “the negro man”; he “behold[s] the picturesque giant and love[s] him” (74). His understanding of the other only exists at surface level, skin color and physicality. He appreciates Black people for their “perfect limbs” and “ample neck and breast” that he can use as a piece of his art. His appropriation only exoticizes and mystifies the identity of the other. These descriptions ultimately turn back to him, the “I,” sanctifying his baseless “love” for the other. In only “behold[ing],” observing, and sensualizing, Whitman builds a “wall of identity.” Though claiming to “[absorb] all to [him]self and for this song” (74), he opens himself up only to take in the external markers of the other, using them for composing a disingenuous poem of democracy.

Whitman uses sexually charged language when calling out to the sea to relate himself with it. Eventually, he turns the subject back to himself and justifies his indifference to morality for his explicit language. Again, only from the distance of “behold[ing],” Whitman assumes that the sea wants to “feel” him and asks it to “dash [him] with amorous wet” (84). Personifying the sea as “breathing broad and convulsive breaths,” he suddenly becomes “integral” with it (84). The descriptions of these actions and integration with another are wildly erotic. Still, just as sex does not actually morph two people into one, Whitman is not actually “integral” with the sea. When he describes himself as the “caresser of life” (74), he reveals his superficiality in “absorbing” otherness. The integration, like his supposed love for the Black man, is disingenuous, and he only deepens his separation with the other by positing himself as the observer.

From this false integration, Whitman entitles himself to be the medium between the self and its world, the “Partaker” of “influx and efflux” (85). He justifies his erotic language by scoffing:

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
 Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,
 My gait is no fault-finder or rejecter’s gait,
 I moisten the roots of all that has grown. (85)

With his narrow mindset of seeing the other only as reflective of sexuality, Whitman attributes the possible criticism of his poem, “evil,” to his sexual language. He misses the gravity of reducing all others, such as the sea and Black men, into eroticism, and goes on to defend his apparent embrace and publicization of sex. Declaring that he “stand[s] indifferent” to “vice” and “virtue” and continually emphasizing “I” and “my” to “stand” his ground, Whitman proudly owns his neglect of the value in others’ identities. He claims to “moisten the roots of all that has grown,” as if to enrich others when he deprives them of values of their identities. Admittedly, the Victorian extreme of rejecting any references to sex and the private sphere is an unfair portrayal of the world, not to mention its clear separation between the self and others. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Whitman’s absolute eroticization of all others, seemingly to open himself up to others, is yet another construction of a “wall of identity.” All descriptions of otherness originate from the consideration of self-importance, the “I” who can “moisten the roots of all that has grown.” He does not genuinely care for the identity of the other but only wants to transmute his vision into his selfhood. Instead of existing in a shared space, Whitman and the sea and the Black man are not in equal relations as they are reduced to eroticism. By claiming that others are without value, just as mentioning sex is not a “vice” nor “virtue,” he not only falsely portrays equality, but also leaves himself without a true identity in the end.

Towards the end of the poem, Whitman shows the true color of his wanton desire to dominate all others, his real purpose in the reduction of others. He demands the audience to “behold” him and proclaims:

You there, impotent, loose in the knees,
 Open your scarf'd chops till I blow grit within you,
 Spread your palms and lift the flaps of your pockets,
 I am not to be denied, I compel, I have stores plenty and to spare,
 And any thing I have I bestow.

I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,
 You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you.

...
 I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,
 Every room of the house do I fill with an arm'd force,
 Lovers of me, bafflers of graves.

Sleep – I and they keep guard all night,
 No doubt, not deace shall dare to lay finger upon you,
 I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself,
 And when you rise in the morning you will find what I tell you is so. (109)

Contrasting himself and “you,” the “impotent” other, he holds all power. Despite claiming that he is the “sign of democracy” and equality, the description of “loose in the knees” points to the immediate inequality between him and the other, “you.” Demanding others to “open” up just as he does when he allegedly embodies them, Whitman perverts the idea of equality. He “dilate[s],” “buoy[s] you up,” and “possess[es] you to [him]self” simply by the physical touch of an “embrace.” This power of possession is obtained by his compulsion, and he unabashedly announces that his power “cannot be denied.” He “compel[s]” and his presence is as violent as an “arm'd force.” His omniscience, as shown throughout various social and natural landscapes in the poem, gives him “stores plenty and to spare” and grants him oppressive omnipotence. Like his earlier rhetoric of “it is so” in describing the “procreant” world (65), Whitman has “no doubt,” in his undeniable ability to own the other by physical touch. What is also certain is his

desire to dominate, not to help others better see their relations with the world. By allegedly taking in others without truly understanding them, he only retains false images of others, dissolving and obscuring his own identity.

By depriving everything of its moral value, Whitman presents only his own, but ironically, his mandate of identity leaves “distinction[s]” between identities nowhere to be found. In his wild imagination, or rather, delusion, there is no value in the identity of anyone or anything. As he absorbs all, he absorbs nothing of substance, nothing that actually constitutes identities of others. Neither is his identity naturally “infuse[d] in the relationship with the other.” Disobeying all notions of justice, Whitman creates his own law for identity that demands others to be consumed by him, which fits exactly with Chamoisseau and Glissant’s term of “mandated blending.” Throughout his poem, Whitman highlights the “I” interwoven with “you” and otherness to create a façade of “relation identity,” when his real purpose is to dominate all others. Just as the world he describes is “always urging,” he is also constantly urging others, by romanticizing cruelty and eroticizing nature, to accept the wall that he has built between him and the world. Following his ethos, a democracy would not consist of people having true exchanges with each other, but rather the reign of a figure like him, who only has an inadequate understanding of whatever is not himself.

Works Cited

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