EVERYWHERE "SHODDY GAUD AND FRAUD": THE INHERENT FRAUDULENCE OF BLACK SUFFRAGE IN WALT WHITMAN'S DEMOCRATIC VISTAS

AUDREY PETTIT

I. Introduction: Tracing the Origins of Voter Fraud

On the evening of August 23rd, 2020, former President Donald Trump tweeted that "The greatest Election Fraud in our history is about to happen," capitalizing "Election Fraud" to imbue it with the authority of an autonomous entity (quoted in Lewis and Tanfani). Trump did not invent the notion of a "rigged" election plagued by fraud: he seized upon a discourse that had been festering for centuries. Yet for all the rhetorical space it occupies, voter fraud in all its supposedly nefarious manifestations has proven virtually nonexistent. Out of more than a billion ballots cast between 2000 and 2014, only 31 incidents of voter impersonation occurred (Levitt). The myth of voter fraud—that devious criminals disguise themselves in convincing costumes to influence electoral outcomes—finds its basis not in factual proof of wrongdoing but in the belief that some Americans are inherently fraudulent. Following Black men's enfranchisement under the 15th Amendment, American poet, essayist, and journalist Walt Whitman authored *Democratic Vistas*—his 1871 treatise on democracy in post-Civil War America. The text has been canonized as required reading in democratic theory; political philosopher Cornel West deemed it a "landmark text in modern democratic thought" (quoted in Sollenberger 203). Indeed, some scholars argue that American civilization cannot be understood without Walt Whitman: he is "America's poet," modernist writer Ezra Pound claimed. "He *is* America" (Pound 13). Still, few have reckoned with Whitman's response to Black suffrage. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman asserts that the soul of American democracy lies not in the faulty mechanisms of voting and political representation but in the purity of its cultural identity. The expansion of the franchise corrupted and confused this identity—heretofore based on whiteness and maleness—by eliminating the boundaries that separated enslaved and slaveholder, Black and white, voter and non-voter. Whitman thus interrogates whether these newly enfranchised men can ever become legitimate voters by engaging in a theatrical, written, and visual tradition that casts Black Americans as farcical, immoral, and fundamentally incapable of adopting the spiritual conditions of citizenship. In so doing, he lays the foundation for a discourse that associates Black Americans voting with fraud.

II. Democracy the Practice Vs. Democracy the Idea

Whitman ushers readers into *Democratic Vistas* by destabilizing the philosophical underpinnings of democratic institutions. He insists that he will not "gloss over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage," contending that a battle will ensue between "Democracy's convictions, aspirations" and "the People's crudeness, vice, caprices" (*Vistas* 4).[1] He seeks not true democracy—one wherein each member of the populace holds equal representation, facilitated by electoral politics—but a citizenry made up of "perfect personalities and sociologies, original, transcendental, and expressing (what, in the highest sense, are not yet expressed at all), Democracy and the Modern" (*Vistas* 5). In his ideal American democracy, only these "perfect personalities" merit citizenship; representation must be limited to the select few whom Whitman, a white, male, upper-class intellectual, deems worthy. This democracy relies not on the corporeal "voices, pens, and minds in the press, lecture-rooms, in our Congress"; these faulty bodies located in physical spaces cannot begin to address what Whitman considers the real, spiritual problems plaguing America (*Vistas* 6). He craves a democracy built on personalities so coherent that opinions need not be "expressed at all," so "transcendental" that elections become outmoded.

In unsettling these democratic institutions, Whitman immediately and rhetorically dichotomizes the abstract, disembodied "Democracy" and the debased, impulsive "People." He mounts a barrier between democratic governance and the substance it consists of—elections, representatives, and perhaps most importantly, voters—aspiring toward a democracy void of voting subjects. The citizenry, Whitman argues, only crowds American cities "with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics" (*Vistas* 14). Here, the people are deformed, pluralistic, and incoherent, whereas democracy is singular, and consequently, unified and logical. Whitman renders the mundane operations of democratic institutions—"legislative problems…tariff and labor questions"—obsolete and ineffectual in comparison to that "profoundest" need, that most "fundamental want": a group of individuals who can touch what "no eye seems to perceive, no voice to state," those who transcend the fallible senses to permeate "the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than popular superficial suffrage" (*Vistas* 5, 6). Whitman sets up a hierarchy that organizes his treatise: the abstract reigns above the physical and the individual triumphs over the masses. By suggesting that democracy requires "new life," Whitman implies its death, characterizing the American citizenry as vacuous and unthinking. This sleepwalking democracy cannot be remedied by "popular superficial suffrage"—in fact, by qualifying suffrage as both "popular" and

[1] In-text citations will refer to Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* as "*Vistas*" for the sake of clarity and succinctness.

"superficial," Whitman implies that it is part of the problem rather than a solution for realizing democracy's true potential (*Vistas* 6). Universal suffrage is too superficial to penetrate "men's hearts, emotions and belief"; the masses will only further corrupt the democratic character (*Vistas* 9). According to Whitman, pragmatic political devices alone cannot vivify the stunted American democracy, cannot awaken the sleepwalking public. The antidote must "go deeper" to salvage "our experiment of Democracy" and yield "the fruitage of success" (*Vistas* 9, 11). But if expanding the franchise exists on the superficial plane, what solution lies in the depths?

III. The "Fantastic Farce": A Hollow Populace and the Minstrel Tradition

As the pragmatic mechanisms of democracy grind ceaselessly forward, Whitman detects a more urgent, hidden affliction: hollowness plagues the citizenry. While the country may possess the outward trimmings of democratic success, "the best class we show is but a mob of fashionably-dressed speculators and vulgarians" (*Vistas* 11). In other words, physical appearance—and consequently, material acts of legislation—are deceptive, a "fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society" (*Vistas* 12). In this way, Whitman points to the theatricality of electoral politics, positing that citizenship and voting are performances acted out by the electorate that do not equate to authentic membership in his aestheticized, idealized democracy. He thus likens broad swaths of the populace to "a mob…of speculators and vulgarians" conning their way into the civic sphere.

By referencing the "fantastic farce" on society's "visible stage," Whitman alludes to the minstrel shows that dominated Northern and Southern theaters in the 19th century, churning out caricatures of Black Americans performed by white actors who blackened their faces with burnt cork (Bloomquist 3). Over 50 minstrel shows center the term "farce" in their title: from "Black Shoemaker: A Negro Farce" to "Mistaken Identity: An Ethiopian Farce" to "Sam Bo-Jam and His African Colony: A Negro Farce" (New York Public Library). All use buffoonery and improbable situations to expose the "true" nature of Black Americans as envisioned by white audiences. Minstrel characters—ranging from the parochial, uncultured, yet mindlessly happy southern plantation slave to the gaudily overdressed northern dandy intent on living above his station—sought to render Blackness as fundamentally incompatible with assimilation into democracy, portraying Black Americans as comedic and ludicrous, too infatuated with music and dance to take on the serious project of electoral politics (Lott 224).[2]

[2] The irony here is obvious: in accusing Black Americans of performing citizenship, these white actors are themselves performing a "fantastic farce" of Blackness. This appropriation and disparaging distortion of Black culture for the sake of white entertainment exists today in white Americans' appropriation of Black slang, fashion, and art.

Minstrel shows proliferated in the late 19th century to counteract the influx of Black Americans in northern cities following emancipation (Lott 226). These performances aimed to demonstrate the absurdity of Black citizenship, offering a perverted "experience" of Blackness even as its spectators sought to absent it.[3] Whitman, too, indulged in minstrel entertainment, speculating in his private notebooks that the American opera ought to "put three banjos (or more?) in the orchestra" in response to the centrality of banjos in minstrel music (quoted in Lott 223). Later, he felt compelled to sketch a modification of English pronunciation suitable for a "native grand opera in America" to be based on what he called "n-----r dialect", alluding to the exaggerated speech patterns employed in minstrel shows (quoted in Lott 237).

In this way, Whitman satirizes the possibility of Black culture stitching itself into the fabric of American identity. He writes in reaction to the 15th Amendment's ratification in 1870, confirming that no citizen's right to vote shall "be denied or abridged…on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," thus granting Black Americans equal standing in the electorate ("All Men Free and Equal" 1). Consequently, Whitman argues that America's citizenry is fabricating a "fantastic farce" of democratic governance without addressing "the important question of Character" (*Vistas* 10). Indeed, minstrelsy frequently targeted this absence of character, depicting Black Americans as hollow charlatans who speak ignorantly on academic topics with great pomposity. Whitman caters to this stereotype, claiming that citizens "may all possess the right to vote—and yet the main things may be entirely lacking" (*Vistas* 6). Here, "all" can earn the right to vote, but only some can possess these unspecified "main things." In this sense, Whitman does not formally repudiate the 15th Amendment but employs the racially coded language of performativity to shroud the legitimacy of newly enfranchised Black Americans in ambiguity.

IV. "The Priest Departs, the Divine Literatus Enters": The Literati as Remedy to a Debased Citizenry

What America needs to formulate an authentic democratic character, Whitman proclaims, is a "great literature" that "penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes, aggregates individuals" (*Vistas* 6). As such, Whitman's iteration of democracy depends not on the expansion and preservation of political representation but on the "Literatuses," or American authors, who will generate "a religious and moral character" that lurks "beneath the political and intellectual bases of the States" (*Vistas* 6). Whitman offers his reader a portrait of these enigmatic Literatuses:

[3] Minstrelsy allowed white Americans to define and commodify Blackness because they could no longer sell Black bodies, depriving Black Americans the privilege of self-definition.

> Some two or three really original American poets (perhaps artists or lecturers) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together, they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to These States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences. (*Vistas* 9)

These poets transcend the vulgar human form to mount the horizon like "stars of the first magnitude." They exist not in the realm of "materialistic experiences" but on an abstract, astral plane that fuses the superficial identities of "races, far localities" with a deeper unity, a "more moral identity." Whitman projects an egalitarian American collective, one that overshadows generations of racial and regional differences in favor of common morality. While dissolving all forms of racial difference professes a pre-racial equality, it ultimately undermines the inequality experienced by Black Americans caught in the upheaval of Reconstruction and dismisses the possibility of legislative action. *Democratic Vistas* advises Americans to shift their focus away from the temporal and performative "elections of Presidents or Congress" (*Vistas* 6). They ought not devote their energies to ensuring that newly enfranchised Black Americans can exercise their right to vote amidst the South's rampant, violent suppression.[4] While representatives occupy only the halls of Congress and lecture-rooms, the "divine Literatus" is both omnipresent and omniscient, a substitute for the religious "priest" (*Vistas* 6). In this way, Whitman locates the Literatus in a space both deep and immaterial, not attainable by all, whereas political institutions—"Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties"—are entirely too ubiquitous, overly accessible, and shallow in significance.

The origins of the term "Literatus" mirror the inaccessibility Whitman aspires to: it is defined as "a member of the literati; a learned person, or one engaged in literary pursuits" (Oxford English Dictionary). Thus, while the superficial significance of Literatus refers to a handful of authors, its deeper meaning points to the "literati," a class of learned citizens. By employing a less colloquial term, Whitman enacts his own literacy test for the public; the use of the Latin "Literatus" acts as a dog whistle heard by an elite class of voters. By positioning "learnedness"—unavailable to most newly-freed Black Americans—as the necessary standard, Whitman's literati are inevitably racialized, consisting almost entirely of educated white Americans.

[4] Following the ratification of the 15th Amendment, white Democrats employed both formal and informal strategies to suppress Black voters, ranging from violence by paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan to a series of laws that purposely suppressed Black voters (Keele et al. 694).

V. The "Anti-Citizen": Mapping Immorality onto the Black Body

By delineating the literati as superior, Whitman implies the existence of a lesser class unqualified for membership in the body politic. He details the symptoms of these outcasts' depravity with granular specificity, cataloging the crimes that render them inferior: "pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity…the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libidinousness" (*Vistas* 14). Whitman does not mention race, locality, or other signifiers of identity in describing this caste of citizens, but he invokes 19th-century legislation that maps the sins of foppishness and sexual deviance onto the bodies of Black Americans. The transgressions Whitman lists parallel those detailed in southern Black Codes, or restrictive laws enacted in the 1860s and 1870s designed to limit the liberties of Black Americans (Woodward 203). These codes placed prescriptive limits on Black Americans' sexuality, or in Whitman's words, their "libidinousness," by outlawing interracial relationships and imposing strict legal standards onto Black partnerships: a Mississippi Black Code declared "all free negroes or mulattoes who do now and have herebefore lived and cohabitated together…as legally married" (Woodward 202). This compulsory union outlawed the "infidelity" Whitman denounces. Should Black Americans break any of these codes—many of which criminalized vagrancy, sexual behavior outside of marriage, or disrespect toward whites, permitting diverse legal interpretations—they would lose their right to vote. In this way, southern politics of purity superseded the 15th Amendment, functioning as yet another aptitude test for Black voters. Whitman replicates this argument in describing the anti-citizens of his aspirational body politic.

Anti-abolitionist propaganda reinforced the link between Black men and the immorality Whitman describes. Depictions of Black men oscillated between extreme virility and infirmity: "The negro is both impotent, since the white represents sexual health, and sexually voracious, since the white represents Christian chastity" (Hatt 3). In this way, the immorality of Black slaves and freedmen provided a foil against which normative white bourgeois identity could affirm its righteousness (Hatt 3). Consequently, Black men could be cast as both "libidinous" and "foppish." The increasingly plausible threat of Black citizenship in the 1820s and 1830s ushered in new interpretations of Black masculinity, all aimed at rendering Black men "anticitizens," enemies rather than members of the social compact (Roth 210). Anti-abolitionist and proslavery advocates turned away from "the cringing, servile male slave," and toward the more threatening "black man as savage aggressor" now liberated to roam the public sphere (Roth 210). What most conspicuously marked these Black men as "inhuman barbarians" was "their intention to violate sexually their master's oldest daughters" (Roth 224). Anti-abolitionists stoked the white public's fears by framing Black men as sexual aggressors capable of desecrating white women's purity and tainting the white race. Concurrent in the representative sphere is

the image of the "foppish," or sartorially obsessed, Black dandy, intent on fashioning himself in the garb of freedom. Anna Cora Mowatt's 1845 antebellum play *Fashion; or Life in New York City* satirizes this archetype through the enslaved, obsequious Zeke, who aspires only to a dignified uniform but never insists on his own freedom because he remains too infatuated by his self-inflicted sartorial subjugation (Miller 78). In this way, Whitman's condemnation of the "fashionably-dressed" and hypersexualized masses invokes the caricatures of Black men who dominated the streets and the stage (*Vistas* 11).

When Whitman describes his ideal American populace, he resorts to a divergent order of language, shifting toward abstract grandiosity and away from granular specificity. He contends that the essential elements of American democracy are lacking, but they can be found within "the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one" (*Vistas* 10). He defines this identity through a series of questions:

> Are there, indeed, *Men* here worthy the name? Are there perfect women, to match the generous material luxuriance? Is there a pervading atmosphere of beautiful manners? Are there crops of fine youths, and majestic old persons? (*Vistas* 13-14)

Whitman thus bases his vision not on measurable standards of success nor on visible markers of excellence but on abstract, subjective aesthetic criteria. He uses vague qualifiers to describe this exceptional citizenry, mounting a vision of "*perfect* women," "*beautiful* manners," "*fine* youths," and "*majestic* old persons" without detailing the tangible qualities that substantiate these labels (emphasis added). By deeming moral and artistic identity the only "reliable" mode of identification, Whitman suggests that individuals can feign citizenship through dress and spectacle, but they cannot perform its unmarked spiritual conditions. In this way, Whitman uses "personalism"—the poet's own term that signifies a focus on the individual in all his spiritual, material, and national complexity—as a means of evaluating the body politic and pursuing a perfect unity of selves (Sollenberger 5).

While at first glance radically holistic, Whitman's fixation on creating a society of "perfect," "beautiful," and "majestic" individuals readily translates to a eugenicist paradigm. The term "eugenics" derives from the Greek word *eugenes,* meaning "good in birth." As the etymology suggests, eugenics dealt with "all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race" in pursuit of a society that is "well-born" to "attain human perfection" (Burke and Castaneda 6). One cannot read Whitman without recognizing his preoccupation with the problem of right birth—from the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*, he proclaims the necessity of "an athletic democracy" "well-begotten and rais'd by a perfect mother" (*Leaves of Grass* 123). Throughout *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman borrows emergent eugenicist rhetoric as he proclaims the necessity of "a fitly born and bred race" raised by a "a race of

perfect mothers" in the formation of his democratic body (*Vistas* 15, 63). Among Whitman's collected papers is a binding of *Hereditary Descent: Its Laws and Facts Applied to Human Improvement*, wherein phrenologist Orson Fowler argues the importance of good parentage in the inheritance of moral traits (Killingsworth 34). Whitman is unavoidably invested in building up the white race, and while not a self-proclaimed eugenicist, he feared the material and spiritual degradation of what he calls the "American races" (*Vistas* 21).

VI. "Bad Blood": Whitman's Project of Race-Building

While Whitman warns against Black Americans' entry into the civic sphere, more concerning to him is the imminent corruption of white citizens. Like many liberal republicans of his era, Whitman straddled the boundary between vehement racism and multiracial humanism: he resisted enfranchisement "both on states-rights grounds and because of his conviction that moral questions could not be affected by legislation," thus prioritizing the rights of abstract "states" above those of their inhabitants (Idzerda 180). Whitman began his journalistic career as an ardent Free-Soiler who opposed the extension of slavery into new territory. He did so not out of moral convictions; Whitman argued that introducing slavery into new territories would discourage whites from migrating into them because white labor could never compete with free slave labor (Klammer). In an 1847 editorial, he proclaims that "the young men of the free States must not be shut out from the new domain…by the *introduction* of an institution which will render their honorable industry no longer respectable" (Klammer). Here, Whitman understands slavery not in terms of the dehumanization of Black men and women but by the degradation of white men's "honorable industry."

Herein lies the root of Whitman's anxiety surrounding "popular superficial suffrage" that courses through *Democratic Vistas*: the decline of the white race. His urgency in transcending the vice-ridden citizenry stems from "young men and women painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood" (*Vistas* 14). In this way, Whitman uses imagery associated with stereotypes of Blackness—those of "muddy complexions" and "bad blood"—to racialize working-class whites, suggesting that they have lowered themselves to the level of Black Americans. Simultaneously, he intimates that Black people are disguising themselves as 'real Americans,' attempting to conceal their "muddy complexions" yet nevertheless incapable of altering their inalienable, interior "bad blood" (*Vistas* 14). Whitman's emphasis on the proliferation of "bad blood" reflects 19th-century beliefs that a material distinction exists between "White blood" and "Negro blood." As such, prior to the passage of the 15th Amendment, citizens with even one-sixteenth "Negro blood" were barred from voting (Cooper 81). An article in the *Detroit Free Press* dated April 4th, 1866 details how "a resident…was convicted of illegal voting,"

having been determined not to meet the racial standards of citizenship due to "medical testimony…that the prisoner had negro blood in his veins, to the amount, however, of less than one-sixteenth" (*Detroit Free Press* 1). This decision finds its basis in what became known as the "one-drop rule," a social and legal principle of racial classification asserting that any person with even one Black ancestor is Black. The principle took hold largely as a reaction against the incorporation of white-passing people into the white majority following the Civil War, generating the notion of "invisible blackness" (Cooper 82). Consequently, Whitman fuels fears surrounding the undetected presence of "bad blood," espousing a belief that racial identity is biological, that it can be hidden, and that physical appearance can mask the true essence of an individual.

The impetus for *Democratic Vistas*, Scottish cultural critic Thomas Carlyle's 1867 essay "Shooting Niagara," similarly declares that the expansion of the franchise will result in "swarmery," or "the Gathering of Men in Swarms" (Carlyle 2). Just as Whitman fears the presence of "vast suffocating swarms," grouped indiscriminately together "in a lump," Carlyle argues that mingling the entire populace in one democratic body with no elites will corrupt and degrade the people (*Vistas* 20). His bitter polemic disparages the Second Reform Bill of 1867 that enfranchised a portion of Britain's male working class, but central to his tirade is the "N----r question." He insists that each race holds an inherent station, and regarding the Black man, "the Almighty Maker has appointed him to be a servant" (Carlyle 4). He more explicitly asserts Whitman's claim that there is good blood and "bad blood," and man cannot transcend his racial position (*Vistas* 14). Carlyle mocks the possibility of a multiracial society: "Any man equal to any other; Quashee N----r to Socrates or Shakespeare" (*Vistas* 20, 18; Carlyle 3). For Carlyle, the extension of the franchise portends not revolution but the emergence of "a Population of that sunk kind, ardent only in pursuits that are low…a low-minded *pecus"* (Carlyle 4).[5] Like Whitman, his concern lies in the degradation of the white race at the hands of racially illegible bodies.

While Carlyle explicitly argues that the source of this degradation is the "emancipated N----rs," Whitman repurposes Carlyle's language in a non-racialized context (Carlyle 3). In a footnote, Whitman applauds the authenticity of Carlyle's argument, claiming that it comes "from an earnest soul, and as contributing certain sharp-cutting metallic grains, which…may be good hard, honest iron" (*Vistas* 18).[6] His descriptions of an "earnest soul" and "honest iron"—a substance whose interior material aligns with its exterior appearance—contrast the artifice that Carlyle and Whitman observe among the populace: the "vulgarity in our People's expectations"

[5] Here, Carlyle uses the Latin word for a beast or animal, "pecus" to describe the debased populace. As demonstrated by Whitman's use of the Latin word "Literatus," Carlyle masks the deeper meaning of his text to all but a learned caste of readers (Law Dictionary).

[6] The format of Whitman's response—as a footnote rather than as part of the essay's main text—implies that a deeper truth lurks behind the superficiality of the written argument.

and the prevalence of a "people drowned in Hypocrisy" (Carlyle 6). Whitman similarly observes "an atmosphere of *hypocrisy* throughout" in the "*vulgarity* of the ostensible masses" (*Vistas* 11, 71; emphasis added).[7]

Ironically, Whitman himself does not circumvent the hypocrisy he and Carlyle diagnose. Several poems in *Leaves of Grass* portray Black Americans with great sensitivity. In the 1855 poem "The Sleepers," Whitman even gives voice to the slave's desire for vengeance, imbuing his speaker with a depth of emotion that most Americans disavowed: "I have been wronged . . . I am oppressed . . . I hate him that oppresses me" (*Leaves of Grass* 223). Whitman is the poet who wrote about tending to the runaway slave, who looked upon the enslaved person on the auction box and saw generations of descendants. He held these ideas in tension with his private letters, wherein he describes Black Americans as "baboons" and "wild brutes" (Porter). Perhaps this paradox can be explained by Whitman's most quoted claim: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (*Leaves of Grass* 51). He writes in his notebooks that he is "the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves," leveling the differences forged by slavery in an attempt to piece the union back together (*Notebooks* 61*)*. Even so, self-contradiction does not render his private thoughts insincere, and containing multitudes does not deny that one part of his variousness is a disdain for Black Americans and the masses. In this way, he conformed to the paradoxical, unconscious ideology of many white liberals of his era; he saw Black people as human but as inherently inferior humans.

VII. The Illegible Black Body: Anxieties Surrounding Fakery and Sincerity in 19th-Century America

Whitman's performative humanism was symptomatic of a more pervasive illness. Anxieties surrounding strangers' hypocrisy permeated America in the mid to late 19th century, notes historian Karen Halttunen, brought on by "a fluid social world where no one occupied a fixed social position" (Halttunen XV). The elimination of the barrier separating enslaved and slaveholder only exacerbated a pervasive sense of distrust, sparking fears of miscegenation and racial passing. What emerged was a belief that fakery presented "a major threat to American society" (Halttunen XV). As such, Halttunen tracks 19th-century advice pamphlets that teach

[7] In his 1881 article "Death of Thomas Carlyle," Whitman reinforces his previous sentiments, demanding "Who cares that he wrote about Dr. Francia, and 'Shooting Niagara'—and 'the N----r question'—and didn't at all admire our United States?" ("Death" 222). In this sense, Whitman did not carelessly overlook Carlyle's pro-slavery stance, but by setting off his most anti-abolitionist work with em-dashes, suggests that they are a source of his admiration. He vaunts Carlyle's "earnest and genuine" convictions, a quality that ranks as one of the greatest virtues on Whitman's ledger of heroic traits ("Death" 222).

readers how to detect the phonies and frauds who walk among them. Saturating these pamphlets is the archetype of what Halttunen terms the "confidence man": a well-dressed seducer and social climber, skilled in theater and entertainment, intent on manipulating innocent youths into partaking in illicit behaviors. The confidence man's art is corruption; while gentlemanly in appearance, "he is the outgrowth of a diseased and corrupted state of things, and is, consequently, morally diseased himself" (Halttunen 7).

Whitman alludes to these confidence men when he speaks "of dandies and ennuyees, dapper little gentlemen from abroad, who flood us with their thin sentiment of parlors, parasols, piano-songs, tinkling rhymes" (*Vistas* 54). While apparently critiquing European feudalism, itself the model for American slavery, when translated into an American context, these "dandies and ennuyees" are unavoidably racialized. Whitman taps into a visual lexicon that emerged after the passage of the 15th Amendment, one that positions the Black man's body as fraudulent, manipulating his appearance to win entry into white spaces. These depictions of enfranchised Black men were the amalgam of the crude caricatures saturating minstrel shows—particularly that of the northern dandy—and the moral degeneracy associated with confidence men. Images of oversized and feminized Black men donning ostentatious top hats, puffed-out neckties, and long canes pervaded post-Civil War newspapers, paralleling the costumes Halttunen describes. A comic printed in 1870 illuminates the racial undertones lurking in written descriptions of these confidence men. In it, a dandified Black man, clad in a top hat, checkered necktie, and cane, struts across the foreground, oblivious to the two newsboys behind him, dwarfed in comparison (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*). The comic's caption narrates the newsboys' conversation: the first asks "Say, Bill, who's that?" and the second responds "That! Why that there chap are the Fifteenth Amendment" (see fig. 1). The 15th Amendment is corporealized in these over-stylized Black men, implying that no degree of mimicry can make the manners and refinement of white citizens natural to the Black body. It thus warns against the proliferation of Black confidence men susceptible to corrupting young white newsboys.

*Fig. 1. A dandified Black man is equated to the 15th Amendment in an 1870 newspaper (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*).*

Perhaps more threatening was these men's unbridled access to white women: one comic from *Harper's Weekly* depicts a Black man donning a puffed-out necktie and eyeglass with a white woman on each arm, their skin the color of the unprinted newspaper, his as dark as the text's ink, rendering them irreconcilable opposites (Nast). In the comic's alternate reality, there are "colored voters everywhere," as stated on a sign in the background, and white men dote on Black men. The existence of Black voters and the ensuant racial integration is thus inextricably linked to white men's humiliation.

Fig. 2. A comic warns against superficial suffrage as Black men mingle with white women in the formerly exclusive public sphere (Nast).

Both the confidence man and the Black dandy use self-fashioning as a means of transcending their predetermined social station, but what is at stake is "the status of who is or can be a 'natural born gemman,'" as Monica Miller observes (Miller 81). Whitman does not hesitate in providing an answer: Black men may perform the superficial qualities of white nightlife in their "tinkling rhymes" all they want, but they are inevitably limited by their "thin sentiment," lacking the depth of feeling America desperately needs. He draws this conclusion based on the images surrounding him on the stage, in print, and in 19th-century advice pamphlets: from blackface minstrelsy that depicted Black Americans as hollow fops and phony intellectuals to the casting of Black men as immoral dandies and confidence men, intent on ascending the social order at white men's expense.

VIII. The Inherent Fraudulence of Black Suffrage

The 15th Amendment presents Whitman with a conundrum—the barriers separating Black and white, voter and non-voter are steadily eroding, and racially ambiguous bodies flood the streets. Signifiers of race have proven unreliable and superficial, but Whitman insists that he sees "clearly enough… the defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor" (*Vistas* 21-22). He tries to emphasize the visibility and materiality of these

outcasts' otherness in their "defective streaks." Although the differences between the literati and the other—specifically, the uneducated and the nonwhite— have proven tenuous and socially constructed, he aims to render them innate and permanent. Whitman persists in making these distinctions material as he mounts his democratic vision in metaphor:

> Though it is no doubt important who is elected President or Governor, Mayor or Legislator…there are other, quieter contingencies, infinitely more important. Shams, &c. will always be the show, like ocean's scum; enough, if waters deep and clear make up the rest. Enough, that while the piled embroidered shoddy gaud and fraud spreads to the superficial eye, the hidden warp and weft are genuine, and will wear forever. (*Vistas* 30)

Whitman's coded prose—communicating his ideology through symbolic and physical images that only a limited audience could access and understand—reflects his aspirations. The democratic institutions used to elect "President or Governor, Mayor or Legislator," those that instigated the public's campaign for emancipation and Black suffrage, are temporal "scum" passing over the "waters deep and clear" of democracy. Americans must look past the bodies, the noise of protest, the "embroidered shoddy gaud and fraud," that meets but "the superficial eye" to that which is "hidden" and "quieter." Playing on the confidence man's artifice, minstrelsy's "fantastic farce," and the foppish Black dandy as "gaudy" and "embroidered," he likens Black voters to "shams," implying that Black Americans voting is a form of fraud. Fraud thus becomes a state of being; nothing can be done to make these Black voters real.

Still, implicit in Whitman's claim is the belief that these fraudsters will be as visible and removable as the "ocean's scum." The expansion of the franchise resulted in an undifferentiated populace, making it impossible to distinguish the "scum" from the "hidden warp and weft." He thus lurches toward abstraction in claiming that America's true citizens will rise up to clear away the froth:

> For I say, the true nationality of The States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, and is to be, after all, neither the written law, nor (as is generally supposed,) either self-interest, or common pecuniary or material objects—but the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power. (*Vistas* 10)

This "IDEA," capitalized to reinforce its totalizing authority, melts away fakery with "resistless heat." Whitman thus positions himself as a blacksmith, capable of dissolving society's deceptive outer core to reach the valuable metal lurking within.[8] Again, these intensely material images imbue Whitman with a false sense of control over the unchecked population. He displaces unreliable bodies with abstract thought, yet he nevertheless refuses to define the "true nationality" this "tremendous IDEA" forges. Perhaps Whitman's "tremendous IDEA" for national salvation remains undefined because it supersedes the limits of language. It is a sign below the indeterminate signifiers; language is the froth.

Whitman does, however, argue that this great idea will expose "what is native, common to all, inland and seaboard, northern and southern" (*Vistas* 9). The Civil War divided Americans between "northern and southern" based on superficial political differences, but Whitman insists that the spirit of democracy can be united by a "native" quality that remains "common to all," one that 'real' citizens can agree is worth protecting. Simultaneously, he calls for "new blood," later "clear blood," and finally "the best blood," to purify the "bad blood" invading the American races (*Vistas* 9, 14, 41). In this way, Whitman subliminally links his "true nationality" to whiteness, locating race—a form of superficial difference—in the deep and permanent space of his Literatus. Yet he never states this nationality outright, shrouding his ideas in ambiguity as his own form of political power. Ambiguity affords him plausible deniability; he can continue to be both conservative and progressive, elitist and egalitarian. He can continue serving as "America's poet," the Great literatus who voices the experience of common man, while quietly advancing his race-building vision. Like his own ideology, Whitman's "true nationality" is paradoxical and self-contradictory: it is made up of linguistic abstractions and beyond language, abstract and viscerally material, non-racialized and based on racial exclusion.

IX. "Advancing Steadily, Evil as Well as Good": How Whitman Paved the Way for Contemporary Voter Suppression

Whitman concludes *Democratic Vistas* by claiming that America is "advancing steadily, evil as well as good, penetrating deep, without one thought of retraction, ascending, expanding, [keeping] her course, hundreds, thousands of years" (*Vistas* 78). His prediction has proven true: democratic governance has endured, widening the franchise to ever broader swaths of the populace. Still, this growth has come with "evil as well as good": Whitman's belief in the inherent fraudulence of Black suffrage, disguised by a desire to preserve the purity of elections, laid the foundation for a new

[8] Whitman also utilizes the image of smelting when he describes Carlyle's argument against popular suffrage in "Shooting Niagara" as being made of "good hard, honest iron" (*Vistas* 18).

approach to silencing Black voices in the 20th century. Projecting a mission to keep fakery and frauds out of elections and, in so doing, protect American democracy, conservative politicians enforced strict voter eligibility requirements ranging from poll taxes to literacy tests (Shafer). Like the text of *Democratic Vistas*, these laws were ostensibly non-racial, but they disproportionately affected Black and poor white Americans (Shafer). The standards necessary to vote similarly mimicked Whitman's belief that true voters are members of the literati: the wealthy, learned class.[9]

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 significantly diminished the most pervasive, conspicuous, and violent modes of racialized voter suppression ("Voting Rights Act of 1965"). Yet like a contagion plaguing the body politic, Whitman's ideas have endured: they evolved into repeated, false allegations of mass fraud, destabilizing public faith in the integrity of American elections. 75% of Republicans, or 40% of the general electorate, do not believe in the legitimacy of President Biden's 2020 election (Tabor). After losing, President Donald Trump launched the most aggressive promotion of voter fraud in American history. He targeted cities with majority Black populations, such as Camden, New Jersey and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, contending that "a lot of people were coming over from Camden to vote…Happens all the time in Philly...And it's allowed to happen because it's a Democrat, corrupt city" (Tensley). The same assumptions that can be traced from *Democratic Vistas* to Jim Crow persist in the 21st century: that Black people are corrupt, Black people cannot be trusted, and Black votes should not count. The forms of fraud alleged—that Biden's supporters voted twice, that large numbers of cheaters cast their ballots in the name of "dead voters," and that massive quantities of noncitizens cast illegal votes for Biden—could not be proven in any of Trump's 60 lawsuits (Rutenberg et al.). Still, they resulted in new restrictions on voting access in at least 19 states under the banner of "election integrity" (Tabor). The restrictions proposed, ranging from tightened voter ID requirements to limited absentee ballots, would unofficially disenfranchise thousands of Black and low-income voters (Tabor).

Whitman did not invent the idea that some Americans are fundamentally unfit for citizenship. Rather, the most dangerous legacy of *Democratic Vistas* is its success in disguising racism as patriotism. He convinces his literati that their desire to exclude the uncouth from democratic politics stems not from racist sentiment but from their love for "for the life, the *safety of the Flag"* (*Vistas* 20). Yet their efforts to uphold the "ideal" of democracy only truncate democracy in practice. In this way, understanding *Democratic Vistas* as a reaction against Black suffrage forces contemporary audiences to recontextualize its place within the literary and political canon. We must read *Democratic Vistas* not as a testament to the glory of American

[9] At the 1890 Mississippi Convention, the new constitution included a literacy test that required all potential voters to read any section of the Mississippi Constitution and give a reasonable interpretation of that section. This emphasis on interpretation—demanding readers delve beyond the superficiality of the text on the page and draw the right conclusions—is quintessentially Whitman (Shafer).

democracy but as a reminder not to value the abstract idea of the flag more than the huddled masses seeking shelter underneath it.

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Audrey Pettit, Barnard College '22, majored in English and minored in Political Science. After graduating, she served as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in France. She is currently a Ph.D. student in English at New York University, a freelance writer, and a teacher.