

# Whitman's Undemocratic Vistas: Mortal Anxiety, National Glory, White Supremacy

JACK TURNER *University of Washington, United States*

**W**alt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871) has become a touchstone of democratic theory. Commentators of unusual ideological range uphold the book as politically exemplary. This article demonstrates that recent theoretical celebrations of *Democratic Vistas* are sanitized and incomplete. I expose the antidemocratic side of *Democratic Vistas* by analyzing (1) its philosophy of death and (2) its politics of race. Whitman framed his immortalist response to death within an imperialist historical teleology. That teleology entailed violations of Native sovereignty, the political inequality of Black Americans, and the projection of both Black and Native peoples' evolutionary extinction. *Democratic Vistas* emerges from this analysis as both necropolitical and white supremacist. If, as Richard Rorty argues, *Vistas* models a salutary form of reformist "national pride," then it also illustrates the dangerous susceptibility of such pride to moral innocence and self-deceit.

**W**alt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871) has become a touchstone of democratic theory. Commentators of unusual ideological range—from Cornel West on the left to David Brooks on the right—uphold the work as politically exemplary. West calls *Democratic Vistas* "the secular bible for radical democrats"—one that inspires "faith in democracy as a way of life and mode of being in the world" (1999, 489). Brooks writes, "Whenever I hear people say something stupid about America ... I want to punch them in the nose and hand them ... *Democratic Vistas*... . It survives as our nation's most brilliant political sermon because it embodies the exuberant energy of American society" (2003, 32). Contemporary theorists such as George Kateb (1992), Richard Rorty (1998), Jeffrey Stout (2004), Jason Frank (2010), John Seery (2011), Melvin Rogers (2014), and Morton Schoolman (2020) share in the admiration. They see *Democratic Vistas* as expressing a novel theory of democratic individuality, a profound contemplation of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and a useful model of political education.


This article demonstrates that this celebratory portrait of *Democratic Vistas* is sanitized and incomplete. Although *Vistas* is pathbreaking in its elaboration of democratic individualism and articulation of the aesthetic possibilities of democracy, the book also contains antidemocratic elements that compromise its democratic status. Analyzing these elements, I provide a compensatory reading of *Vistas*—one meant *not* to disqualify it from the canon of democratic theory but rather to encourage a more sober appreciation.

I do so by examining two subjects in Whitman that are sometimes analyzed separately but have yet to be analyzed together: his philosophy of death and his

politics of race. In the first section, I explore Whitman's two conflicting positions on death in *Vistas*: what I call his mortalist position and his immortalist position. Paying special attention to Whitman's reading of Lucretius, I show how the immortalist position ultimately eclipses the mortalist one: Whitman sought to allay both his own and his readers' mortal anxiety by projecting an immortal American national literature that promised himself and his fellow citizens a figurative form of immortality.<sup>1</sup> In the second section, I show how the teleological, historical frame of Whitman's immortalism committed it to violations of Native sovereignty and the political inequality of Black Americans; it also entailed an expectation that Black and Indigenous people would go extinct as the white North and white South reconciled after the Civil War and forged a new American future through westward expansion and overseas imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive work of literary scholarship on death in Whitman is Aspiz (2004), but because it confines its scope to Whitman's poetry, it provides no systematic analysis of *Democratic Vistas*. Both Lawler (2011) and Schoolman (2020) perceptively address death in *Vistas*. However, neither tracks the tension between mortalism and immortalism or considers the connections between death and race.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman's racism and imperialism are well known in American literary scholarship. Among the most important discussions are Clark (1955), González de la Garza (1971), Erkkila (1989; 1994), Reynolds (1995), Folsom (1995; 2010; 2018), and Grünzweig (2006). Contemporary democratic theorists engaging Whitman largely ignore this scholarship (but for two important exceptions, see Beltrán [2011] and Dahl [2018]). It may be that democratic theorists have assumed—as Gilson (2020) recently suggested—that Whitman's racism and imperialism are theoretically severable historical remnants that do not compromise his general theory. This article shows that *Democratic Vistas*' racism and imperialism are not historically vestigial but theoretically central. The main conceptual links are between race, empire, and nationhood, which in turn power the book's immortalism. Though I stand on the shoulders of American literary scholars who have documented Whitman's racism and imperialism, I advance their work by demonstrating in more precise detail how race saturates not just *Vistas*' compositional context but also its theoretical infrastructure.

Jack Turner , Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Washington, United States, [jturner3@uw.edu](mailto:jturner3@uw.edu).

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*Democratic Vistas* emerges from this analysis as white supremacist in its background assumptions and political commitments. I use the term white supremacy in a descriptive sense. A social order is white supremacist if it has (1) racially differentiated groups, (2) hierarchical organization of those groups with whites on top, (3) systematic violations of the equal rights of nonwhite persons because of their race, and (4) a tendency to reproduce itself across generations. From an egalitarian point of view, describing a social order as white supremacist cannot help but involve an adverse moral judgment. But my purposes are interpretive, not moral. I seek not to condemn Whitman but rather to understand the social order *Vistas* projects and to show that *white supremacist* is an accurate description.

This reinterpretation illustrates the danger of public intellectual efforts to promote “national pride.” In the twilight of his career, Rorty (1998) argued that the power of the American left was declining because it no longer wove its vision of social change into an emotionally appealing vision of American nationality. He called on his fellow leftists to deprioritize identity politics and rediscover patriotism, upholding *Democratic Vistas* as an exemplary expression of reformist nationality (46).

However, Rorty’s (1998) invocation of *Vistas* took no notice of the work’s white supremacist elements. This enabled Rorty to claim that Whitmanian national pride was compatible with owning up to the nation’s faults (32). The white supremacist content of *Democratic Vistas* exposes the folly of Rorty’s gambit. The book is an object lesson in the ways putatively progressive prideful nationality can rest on violently racist foundations. If Rorty is correct that *Vistas* is a fair specimen of American national pride, then *Vistas* underscores the dangerous susceptibility of such pride to moral innocence and self-deceit.<sup>3</sup>

Confronting the antidemocratic side of *Democratic Vistas* need not prevent us from using the book’s best lines to nourish our own democratic theorizing. But it does require us to acknowledge that democratic readings of *Democratic Vistas* are *selective* readings:<sup>4</sup> anti-democratic elements comingle with democratic ones.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rorty’s position is still influential. Smith’s recent defense of “enlightened patriotism,” for example, favorably invokes Rorty’s reading of Whitman (2021, 25).

<sup>4</sup> As Whitman himself acknowledged (1964, 362–3), *Vistas* is rife with contradiction. I manage the associated interpretive challenges by accounting for contradictory textual evidence and assessing where the balance of evidence points. Unless noted, all quotations are from the 1871 variant (Whitman 1964, 361–426). I refer to page numbers from *Vistas* parenthetically in text.

<sup>5</sup> Contra Olson (2004) and following Smith (1997), I conceptualize democracy and white supremacy as logically incompatible, though as—occasionally—practically collaborative. Democracy implies a moral egalitarianism never consistent with ascriptive hierarchy. Democratic political systems exist on a spectrum, and whenever a political system practices ascriptive hierarchy, it compromises its democratic status. That said, I agree with Olson that white populism can enlist democratic processes, institutions, and ideas to advance white supremacy. However, I disagree with him that white democracy

## TWO POSITIONS ON DEATH: MORTALIST AND IMMORTALIST

In *Vistas*, Whitman famously said, “In the future of These States must arise... poets immenser far, and make great poems of death” (420). America needed great poems of death for two reasons. First, they could relieve mortal anxiety and open their audience to a more intense and loving engagement with life. *Vistas* characterizes “shuddering at death” as beneath the dignity of the democratic individual (421). If democratic poets could persuade people to see death as constitutive of the human condition—to accept it as an indispensable part of nature rather than a curse stemming from original sin—then they would be one step closer to Whitman’s ethical ideal of finding it “enough merely *to live*.” In their ordinary “relations to the sky, air, water, trees, &c., and to the countless common shows, and in the fact of life itself,” democratic individuals would “discover and achieve happiness,” without viewing mortality as cause for anguish (416).

Second, great poems of death could be America’s claim to national artistic immortality. Whitman worried that the United States has not produced any original literature of lasting value. Without such literature, the nation condemns itself to historical obscurity. One of Whitman’s central preoccupations in *Vistas* is the world historical significance of the American project, the nation’s ability to impress posterity by distilling its distinctive genius into “archetypal poems” (366): “It must still be reiterated ... the deep lesson of history and time, that all else in the contributions of a nation or age ... remains crude ... until vitalized by national, original archetypes in literature. They only put the nation in form, finally tell anything—prove, complete anything—perpetuate anything” (405). “Immortal Judah lives, and Greece immortal lives,” Whitman insisted, “in a couple of poems” (366).

In contrast to Pericles, who thought Athenian glory consisted in the greatness of its military and political deeds, which the poets merely represented (and sometimes misrepresented) (Thucydides 1996, II.41), Whitman thinks literature transfigures mortal deeds into subjects that win remembrance. Literature glorifies both life and death; neither life nor death can glorify itself. The most life and death can do is win the admiration of a literary witness, who will make an artistic remembrance to be passed down through the generations. Life cheats death only through literature.

*Vistas* thus takes two conflicting positions on death. The first is a nonsovereign, mortalist position viewing death as indispensable to human identity, even human dignity—in Stephen K. White’s words, a “bearing witness truthfully to my condition of subjection to mortality” (2009, 73). The second is a sovereign, immortalist position that craves everlasting fame—a craving the author claims to feel on his nation’s behalf

is coherent. The trouble with “white democracy” is not democracy; the trouble is the racially circumscribed identity of “the people.”

but which we cannot help but think he also feels on his own behalf. *Vistas* counsels, on the one hand, humble acceptance of human finitude, and on the other, heroic reaching for immortality.

When we examine this conflict in *Vistas*, we see that it provides a window on to more obviously political conflicts: between equality and greatness; between presentist and futurist orientations; between American, Black, and Indigenous identities. Ultimately, the text's sovereign, immortalist ethics eclipse its nonsovereign, mortalist ethics, investing the text with a spirit of overcoming hostile to ordinary democratic life, as well as to nonwhite persons.

### Receding Mortalism: Whitman and Lucretius

The impetus behind both Whitman's mortalist ethics and his immortalist ethics is an Epicurean worry about the harmful effects that the fear of death has on the living of life. Whitman absorbed Epicurean philosophy from Frances Wright's popular treatment of Epicureanism, *A Few Days in Athens* (1822), and J. S. Watson's 1851 translation of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, or *The Nature of Things* (c. 50 BCE; Allen 1960, 138–40). Wright's *A Few Days in Athens* would have exposed Whitman to Epicurus's essential teaching on death: “For while we are, death is not; and when death is, we are not. To the wise, then, death is nothing” (Wright 1825, 105; cf. Epicurus 1994, 29). Watson's translation of Lucretius—Epicurus's Latinate popularizer—would have deepened Whitman's understanding of Epicureanism. In that translation, Lucretius's persona declares “there must be driven utterly from our minds that fear of Acheron [a river in Hades], which disturbs human life from its very foundation, suffusing all things with the blackness of death, nor allows any pleasure to be pure and uncontaminated” (Lucretius 1851, 101).

The Epicureans insisted, first, that body and soul are coterminous. When the body dies, so does the soul. Therefore, the self loses capacity for experience upon death. If the self experiences death at all, it does so only as a fleeting moment of cessation. Therefore, death is nothing to fear—for the self cannot experience it in any significant duration.

Second, the Epicureans insisted that fear of death spoils life. It distracts us from the abundant pleasures of mortal experience. It drives us to embrace religions that promise immortality but threaten eternal punishment. It propels us to try to create immortal legacies here on earth: fame and fortune won through conquest but subject to the same decay to which the body is subject and thus incapable of finally settling mortal anxiety (Lucretius 1851, bk. V).

Only learning and accepting the nature of things—the mortality of the soul, the finitude of the person—deliver the self from the misery attending the pursuit of immortality. The Epicureans embrace a naturalistic understanding of the cosmos and celebrate earthly pleasure. Even though death ultimately terminates pleasure, in Wright's words, “the uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our

pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption” (108).

Whitman agreed especially with the second Epicurean claim that fear of death spoils life. This is why he spoke so contemptuously of “shuddering at death” in *Democratic Vistas*. It also partly accounts for his fierce anticlericalism (Aspiz 2004, 27; Lawler 2011, 247, 270). Whitman wanted, in Ed Folsom's words, to “remove death from the grip of religions, which used superstitions about death and afterlife and heaven and hell to institute hierarchy and to control human behavior” (2010, 122).

As for the first Epicurean claim—that the soul is mortal and the fear of death irrational—Whitman's beliefs are more complicated. On the one hand, Whitman thought—even if the claim was true—it was too austere to soothe “shuddering at death.” He thus often opted for naturalistic and worldly conceptions of immortality—the body sinking into the ground and returning as grass, the writer immortalizing himself through literature. “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,” Whitman wrote in “Song of Myself” (1980, 8). The sprout signifies, first, the blade of grass born from a soil partly made up of decomposed human bodies—demonstrating the organic continuity and renewal of those bodies. The sprout signifies, second, the published page through which the writer lives after his body has died. One of the central motifs of *Leaves of Grass* is its playful self-reference to its own pages as leaves. Whitman deployed these naturalistic and worldly conceptions of immortality to loosen the hold of supernaturalism—Christian visions of heaven and hell, for example—through which institutionalized religion got its power (Turner 2011, 273–82).

On the other hand, an Epicurean mortalist view of death is still present in Whitman, and though less prominent than the immortalist views, deserves attention because of its deep correspondence with Whitman's teaching on the existential self-sufficiency of earthly life. The most forceful expression of the mortalist view is Whitman's 1855 poem, “Who Learns My Lesson Complete?” Early in the poem, Whitman promises immortality to allay his readers' mortal anxiety and ease them into consideration of alternative ways of thinking about death. Yet as the stanzas unfold, Whitman redirects the reader's attention to the magisterial abundance of mortal life:

Is it wonderful that I should be immortal, as every one is immortal,  
I know it is wonderful.... but my eyesight is equally wonderful ...

And that my soul embraces you this hour, and we affect each other without ever seeing each other, and never perhaps to see each other, is every bit as wonderful, And that I can think such thoughts as these is just as wonderful. (1980, 153–4)

“Who Learns My Lesson Complete?” gradually devalues immortality by placing it on equal evaluative footing with eyesight, literature, thought, and numerous other mortal wonders. The cumulative effect is to

affirm mortal life in the absence of immortality—for if eyesight, literature, thought, and other mortal wonders are just as wonderful as immortality, then the subtraction of immortality from our condition is of ever diminishing significance (Turner 2011, 283–9).

Whitman's mortalist position survives in *Democratic Vistas*, not in any statement as strong as “Who Learns My Lesson Complete?” but rather in the philosophical correlates of the position: the existential self-sufficiency of both present time and mortal humanity. We see this when Whitman encourages us to “find it enough merely to live”—for if living out mortal time is existentially sufficient, then immortality is unnecessary (416). We also see it in his praise of “completeness in separatism, of individual personal dignity, of a single person ... characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone” (374). If the individual is “complete” in his individuality, then he needs neither earthly reabsorption, nor literary immortality, nor the transmigration of his soul to justify his existence. His mortal existence justifies itself, or more accurately, makes existential justification impertinent.

Yet Whitman's mortalism in *Democratic Vistas* is eclipsed by a much stronger immortalism. We see this in the text's one invocation of Lucretius himself:

What the Roman Lucretius sought most nobly, yet all too blindly, negatively to do for his age and its successors, must be done positively by some great coming Literatus, especially Poet, who ... will absorb whatever science indicates, with spiritualism, and out of them, and out of his own genius, will compose the great Poem of Death. (421)

Whitman characterizes Lucretius's mortalist representation of death as noble yet blind. It is noble because it seeks to allay the shuddering at death that spoils life. How is it blind? In his use of the word “negatively” as an appositive for “blindly,” Whitman suggests that Lucretius's negativity is his blindness: Lucretius's philosophical view of the mortality of the soul is too austere, too rationally severe, too rhetorically severe, to win widespread acceptance and banish mortal fear from life. Freeing democracy from the mental and spiritual confines of orthodox religion requires a warmer rhetorical approach, maybe even a transitional object to soothe fears of annihilation as people turn away from religious authority to personal and scientific authority. Mass publics need something tangible to hold onto to overcome the fear of death. Orthodox Christianity's promise of heaven provided consoling positive content for centuries. The problem was heaven's flipside—the threat of eternal punishment—and the power of social control that that threat gave (414). Whitman wanted to free his audience from both Christian orthodoxy and clerical power by providing them visions of immortality detached from the threat of damnation. Theoretically, Lucretius's mortalism could serve the purpose of breaking orthodox religion's hold, but it requires too much tolerance of nothingness, of void. In Whitman's eyes, most people (perhaps even he himself) cannot accept the thought

of death as a full stop. Better, then, that poets provide positive, non-Christian, rhetorically appealing visions of immortality in place of Lucretian mortalism to allay shuddering at death.

Here a certain condescension toward “the people” surfaces. Whitman presumes to know what mass audiences can and cannot handle in dealing with mortality; he rejects Lucretian mortalism because of its negativity and calls on “some great coming literatus” to provide a more positive vision of death, “absorb[ing] whatever science indicates, with spiritualism, and out of them ... compos[ing] the great poem of death” (421). This great poem, possessed of positive content and staving off nothingness, will set people's mortal anxiety at ease through a beautiful combination of scientism and spiritualism as opposed to the morbid Lucretian portrait that says soul and body are one and the former dies with the latter. Even if Lucretian mortalism is true, people cannot handle the truth.

Lucretius thought mortalism would heal by virtue of its truth. Whitman thinks Lucretian mortalism too strong a truth for people to accept. What is Whitman's alternative?

### National Immortalism

Whitman's alternative to Lucretian mortalism is national immortalism. The test of this project is whether the nation produces “archetypal” poems comparable to Homer's *Iliad* and the Hebrew Psalms, securing the nation and its people's immortality (366). The logic turns on (1) the self's identification with the nation and (2) the nation's poetic memorialization. Democratic citizens can take comfort in the thought that—though their bodies will die—their selves endure insofar as they are the collective subject of, and inspiration for, immortal national poetry. Just as Pericles believed Athenian citizens could win immortal glory through service to a politically great city, Whitman believes American citizens can do so through identification with a poetically great nation.

American archetypal poems will be literary distillations of American cultural innovativeness. The culture's democratic quality will be its claim to novelty. Whitman's statements in *Vistas* of what is distinctive about democratic culture are some of the book's best lines: “For after the rest is said ... it remains to bring forward ... the idea of that Something a man is, (last precious consolation of the drudging poor,) standing apart from all else ... untouchable by any canons of authority” (373–4). His description of the sublime individualities born of constitutional democracy stands alongside celebration of the people's “latent power and capacity” as a collective “world-making power” (377; Frank 2010, 183). Whitman's ability to capture both the intensely personal, introspective wonders of democratic individualism, on the one hand, and the intensely public, creative energies of democracy “out-of-doors,” on the other, helps explain why theorists ranging from liberal constitutionalists to radical democrats claim him as one of their own (Frank 2010; Kateb 1992).

The trouble—and it is one little noticed by commentators<sup>6</sup>—is the way these magnificent observations are set within a teleological frame that undermines the democratic quality of *Democratic Vistas*. This teleological frame surfaces in at least two critical moments. First, it surfaces in Whitman's Hegelian portrait of American historical unfolding. After “two grand stages of preparation-strata, I perceive ... a third stage,” Whitman writes. The first stage is political: “putting on record the political foundation rights of immense masses of people.” The second stage is economic: “material prosperity, wealth, produce, labor-saving machines, iron, cotton.” The third stage, “rising out of the previous ones, to make them and all illustrious ... a native expression-spirit ... to be evidenced by original authors ... a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command” (409–10).

Second, the teleological frame surfaces in Whitman's definition of a historical criterion for American democracy's success: the production of world historical literature on the same level as “immortal Judah” and “immortal Greece” (366). Anything short of this is failure. Ironically, this takes the power of present generations to affirm and justify their democratic existence out of their own hands and places it in future hands. Though present generations still hold the power to create and inspire world historical literature, future generations will determine whether that literature counts as great and deserves canonization.

The teleological frame is democratically dubious for two reasons. First, in making immortal remembrance the telos of national life, the frame instrumentalizes everyday life, subordinating it to the project of immortal greatness. Ordinary democracy becomes the means to immortal glory rather than a self-justifying end. Second, the teleological frame aids and abets a racial developmentalism whose objective is an imperial American identity forged through (1) violations of Native sovereignty in the mainland West and throughout the Pacific and (2) the accommodation of white domination in the postwar South.

## RACE, EMPIRE, AND NECROPOLITICS

The racial politics of *Democratic Vistas* are an interpretive puzzle. Notwithstanding the fact that the book was composed intermittently during Radical Reconstruction, the text contains no specific endorsements of racial egalitarianism; neither does it contain explicit endorsements of white supremacy. The surface agnosticism of the text on racial equality is surprising given how the antebellum *Leaves of Grass* featured humanizing portraits of Black people that later inspired such figures as Sojourner Truth and Langston Hughes to characterize Whitman as a literary revolutionary (Reynolds 1995, 148; cf. Bennett 2020, 69–72). The surface agnosticism is puzzling also because *Vistas*

began as a response to Thomas Carlyle's May 1867 “Shooting Niagara: And After?” where Carlyle interpreted Emancipation as evidence of the absurdity of democratic egalitarianism (Folsom 2010, xxx). After ridiculing the proposition of “the equality of men,” Carlyle condemns what he sees as the waste of the American Civil War:

A continent of the earth has been submerged ... by deluges as from the Pit of Hell; half a million ... of excellent White Men, full of gifts and faculty, have torn and slashed one another into horrid death ... which will leave centuries of remembrance fierce enough: and three million absurd Blacks ... are completely “emancipated;” launched into the career of improvement,—likely to be ‘improved off the face of the earth’ in a generation or two! (1867, 7–8)

Whitman interpreted Carlyle's argument as a challenge worthy of response. When he answered initially in an article titled “Democracy” in the December 1867 issue of *The Galaxy*, Whitman portrayed Carlyle's fears of racially promiscuous populist chaos as exaggerated: “such a comic-painful hullabaloo ... about ‘the Niagara leap’ ... I never yet encountered; no, not even in extremest hour of midnight, in whooping Tennessee revival, or Bedlam let loose in crowded, colored Carolina bush-meeting” (1964, 750). However, when Whitman revised “Democracy” for incorporation into *Democratic Vistas*, he deleted this modest defense of Black populist energy and conceded that though “I was at first roused to much anger and abuse by [“Shooting Niagara”]... I have since read it again ... as contributing certain sharp-cutting metallic grains, which, if not gold or silver, may be good hard, honest iron” (375–6).

Whitman's choice not to defend Emancipation against Carlyle—or to represent Black people as coequals—has led scholars such as Ed Folsom, Eddie Glaude, and Lisa Gilson to characterize the racial politics of *Democratic Vistas* as a politics of “silence,” “evasion,” and “omission” (Folsom 2010, xvi; Glaude 2019, 15; Gilson 2020, 2). They suggest that Whitman's failure consists of what he chose *not* to do. This framing is half true: a reader looking for positive representations of Black (and Indigenous) Americans in *Vistas* will be disappointed. However, thinking of the book's racial politics as one of absence misses half the picture. There is, in fact, a positive racial politics present in *Vistas*: a politics of American imperial developmentalism that travels west over the continental mainland and overseas into the Pacific. This American imperial developmentalism is white in all but name: it takes for granted the violation of Indigenous sovereignty and demographic decline of Indigenous people, as well as the political subordination of Black Americans in the U.S. South.

## Settler Colonialism and Imperial Expansion

Whitman's teleology of American national development sits squarely within a settler colonial vision of territorial expansion. In Adam Dahl's words,

<sup>6</sup> The exception is Dahl (2018, 152).

Whitman's "democratic-settler" is his "representative man" (2018, 146). *Vistas* frames the "general homestead" and the "pleasant western settlement or town" as harbingers of the democratic future (383, 402). It also predicts that in "a few years the dominion-heart of America will be far inland, toward the West. Our future national capital may not be where the present one is... The main social, political spine-character of the States will probably run along the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi rivers, and west and north of them, including Canada" (384–5). *Democratic Vistas* makes no mention of the fact that such expansion routinely entailed Indigenous death and displacement. Nowhere do we find accounts of the public and private settler violence, the spread of Euro-American disease, and the decimation of economically essential wildlife (Blackhawk 2006; Frymer 2017; Rana 2010).

Whitman had no excuse for ignorance on this front. In the 1860s alone, the *New York Times* reported the Sand Creek Massacre, where 133 Cheyenne and Arapaho (including 105 women and children) were killed; the "Great Sioux Uprising," which resulted in the mass execution of 38 Dakotas; and the Navajo "Long Walk," a four-hundred-mile forced march that cost two hundred Native lives (Calloway 2019, 316; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 136–7; *New York Times* 1863; 1867; 1868). Whitman's failure to address the violence of westward expansion was not a case of unknowing omission but of culturally habitual sanitization. One newspaper editorial that Whitman wrote in the run-up to the Mexican War, in fact, indicates his willingness to accept expansionist violence. In 1846, in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Whitman declared Mexico "an enemy deserving a vigorous 'lesson.' ... Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward for a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand" (Whitman 1998, 358–9; cf. Erkkila 1994; González de la Garza 1971; Grünzweig 2006).

The language of empire permeates *Vistas*. Though it is tempting to read this language as rhetorical flourish, Whitman's commitment to American economic expansion—embodied in the second stage of his Hegelian teleology—forbids an innocent reading (Dahl 2018, 142–53). Sometimes Whitman's imperial language is qualified, such as when he asks whether it is worth "being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul" (370). But the object of Whitman's regret is not the acquisition of the body but rather the failure to develop a commensurate largeness of soul. Whitman takes for granted that the "vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed body" is necessary to national development (363).

When Whitman published the first edition of *Vistas* in 1871, he predicted that "When the hundredth year of this Union arrives, there will be some forty to fifty great States, among them Canada and Cuba... The Pacific will be ours, and the Atlantic mainly ours." When the Centennial came, and his prediction of 40 to 50 states fell short (there were still only 38 in 1876) and Canada remained with Britain and Cuba with Spain,

he revised the date in an updated edition of *Vistas* to the "second centennial," giving the nation one more century to fulfill his prophecy (413). Though American annexation of Canada never came to fruition, and though the three U.S. occupations of Cuba (1898–1902, 1906–1909, and 1917–1922) were all temporary, Whitman's prediction about U.S. imperial domination of the Pacific was accurate. The United States was "destined," he declared in *Vistas*, "to the mastership of that sea and its countless paradises of islands" (385). Six years after Whitman died in 1892, the United States achieved that mastership in the wake of the Spanish-American War, when the Philippines, Guam, the Hawaiian Islands, and American Samoa—among others—became U.S. territories. "By the time the shooting stopped and the treaties were ratified," writes Daniel Immerwahr, "the United States had gained more than seven thousand islands holding 8.5 million people" (2019, 80). The process was rife with racial conflict and bloodier than most mainland Americans realize. For example, the Philippines were the scene of a 14-year campaign of counterinsurgency between 1899 and 1913—costing the lives of at least 4,196 U.S. soldiers and 250,000 Filipinos (Immerwahr 2019, 103).

My goal is not to lay these deaths at Whitman's feet. *Vistas* only predicted American overseas expansion, and only in broad outline. It is nevertheless fair to observe that *Vistas*' sanitization of the racial violence central to U.S. expansionism implicates the text in a long-standing national tradition of moral innocence, what Lawrie Balfour defines as "willful ignorance" of "the horrors of the American past and present and their implications for the future" (2001, 27). In the shadow of the Mexican War, the Sand Creek Massacre, the mass execution of Dakotas, and the Navajo "Long Walk," *Vistas* characterized "the American born populace" as "the peaceablest and most good-natured race in the world" (377). This innocence shielded *Vistas*' audience from explicit acknowledgment of—in Achille Mbembe's words (2019)—the "necropolitics" of American empire: the historical dependence of white pioneer settlement and imperial adventure on Indigenous suffering and death.

We must finally note Whitman's general subscription to nineteenth-century America's widespread belief "in the inevitable vanishing of the continent's indigenous peoples"—in Whitman's words, of the "Great Aboriginal Race now passing slowly but surely away" (Rubinstein 2018, 306, 308; Whitman 2003, 67; cf. Clark 1955, 51–7; Folsom 1995, 64, 89). This helps explain Indigenous peoples' representational absence from *Vistas*. Whitman envisioned Indigenous peoples making up a progressively smaller proportion of America's future. Absence, in this case, signifies not innocent omission; rather, it signifies a cultural background assumption of gradual Indigenous disappearance.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>7</sup> Why then do Native figures occasionally appear in Whitman's poetry? As Clark (1955) and Dahl (2018) observe, Whitman felt no

background assumption corresponds to Whitman's representation of the American West as exhilaratingly open for white settler movement, economic development, and political and spiritual futurity.

### White Domination in the South

As white settlers move the center of American life westward in Whitman's vision and develop a nation worthy of immortal poetry, will Black people join them as coequals? Though *Democratic Vistas* never addresses this question explicitly, careful examination of the text and surrounding context indicates that Whitman assumed they would not. Instead, Black Americans would remain in the South and eventually go extinct as a people.

The most direct evidence of *Vistas*' anti-Black politics is its hushed opposition to Black suffrage. There are five separate moments addressing suffrage's expansion through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Three are positive in valuation, yet conspicuously unspecific. Two are negative in valuation, yet puzzlingly indirect.

The first positive reference acknowledges the "priceless value of our political institutions": here, Whitman applauds "general suffrage" and "the latest, widest opening of the doors" — a nod to the Fifteenth Amendment (364). Though the primary significance of the Fifteenth Amendment was enfranchising Black men, Whitman avoids specifically mentioning them. The same is true of the second positive reference: Whitman praises the "Federal Constitution," "as it began and has now grown, with its amendments," a clear acknowledgment of the authority of Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, but without mentioning the Black population those Amendments sought to free and empower (410). The third positive reference appears in the book's end notes: "As to general suffrage, after all, since we have gone so far, the more general it is, the better. I favor the widest opening of the doors" (531). Whitman here makes *implicit* reference to Black men, but as a marker of egalitarian extremity, of how "far" the nation has gone. All three positive references endorse universal suffrage while avoiding explicit mention of Black people—as though their appearance in *Vistas* would be off-putting for Whitman's intended audience (cf. Gilson 2020, 9, 14–5).

What about the two *negative* references? The first appears near the opening. Whitman states that he will not "gloss over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States. In fact, it is to admit and face these dangers I am writing" (363). Whitman's characterization of universal suffrage as an "appalling danger" is significant. It exhibits what Toni Morrison

calls the "associative language of dread" frequently attending nineteenth-century white writers' subtextual references to race. In Morrison's eyes, such language should alert us to a "shadow" Black presence (Morrison 1992, x). Yet shortly after promising to address the "dangers" of universal suffrage, Whitman pivots to a different question: how to realize American "nationality" through "vigorous yet unsuspected Literatures" (364). Immortalist nationalist literature steers the audience away from the subject of Black equality.

The second negative reference to Black suffrage deserves emphasis because it is a neglected but decisive piece of textual evidence—a smoking gun that has been almost entirely overlooked.<sup>8</sup> The reference occurs in a cryptic parenthetical passage following Whitman's long defense of democracy as "the best ... general caller-forth ... for immortal souls":

(While, for myself, I would cheerfully agree—first covenanting that the formative tendencies shall be administered in favor, or at least not against it, and that this reservation be closely construed—that until the individual or community show due signs, or be so minor and fractional as not to endanger the State, *the condition of authoritative tutelage may continue, and self-government must abide its time.*) (381, emphasis added)

The passage constructs a space of exception: a condition of "authoritative tutelage" for individuals or communities judged by authorities to be unready for democracy. In one sense, such a space of exception is uncontroversial: democracies to this day treat children as unready for the obligations of citizenship. However, Whitman is not referring to children. He is referring to adults. We know this, first, because the language of the passage itself—a "reservation" that should be "closely construed"—indicates that he is constructing an exception that is in some sense abnormal, one not as taken-for-granted as the one for children. The language also suggests that the line between "authoritative tutelage" and political empowerment is not as straightforward and rule bound as an age requirement but is rather a matter of political judgment that must look out for "due signs."

In deciphering the meaning of this space of exception, it is helpful to compare it with two analogous spaces in contemporaneous texts. The first is an infamous portion of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859). The passage from Mill is substantively similar to the "authoritative tutelage" passage:

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine [of liberty] is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of

inconsistency between celebrating Indians' history and language as a white cultural resource and denying Indians a place in America's political future. "Although they provided a symbolic source of democratic culture and identity," Dahl writes, "Indians figure into Whitman's poetry as 'past tense presences'" (2018, 149). Whitman's Indian, says Clark, "is a man with a past but no present or future" (1955, 54).

<sup>8</sup> The only work I have found that notes it is Loving (1978, 97), but he analyzes it mainly for its biographical significance, as context for the falling out between Whitman and William Douglas O'Connor over Black suffrage. Loving does not analyze the passage's philosophical significance: its logical relationship to Whitman's theory of democracy and its parallel to Mill's *On Liberty*.

children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood... For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage... Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. (2003, 81)

Whitman avoids Mill's terminology of "despotism" and "barbarians." Substantively, however, Whitman's "authoritative tutelage" passage and Mill's benevolent despotism passage resemble each other: in both instances, politically empowered populations may subordinate other populations that they judge unready for political freedom.<sup>9</sup>

An illuminating way to identify at least one of the populations Whitman has in mind is by comparing the "authoritative tutelage" passage with a related passage in the *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, Volume II* (1885), recalling President Andrew Johnson's ascension to the presidency in April 1865. Grant writes, "I do not believe that the majority of the Northern people at that time were in favor of negro suffrage. They supposed that it would naturally follow the freedom of the negro, but that there would be a time of probation, in which the ex-slaves could prepare themselves for the privileges of citizenship before the full right would be conferred." Grant then details how the stridency of white southern determination to resubordinate freedmen and reassert unrepentant strength in national politics drove northerners "to enfranchise the negro, in all his ignorance": "It became an absolute necessity... because of ... the blindness of the Southern people to their own interest" (1990, 752–3).

The parallel between the idea Grant attributes to northern white people—"A time of probation, in which the ex-slaves could prepare themselves for the privileges of citizenship"—and Whitman's idea of "authoritative tutelage" is unmistakable. Both the "time of probation" and the period of "authoritative tutelage" are abnormal departures from political equality. Both also involve preparation for citizenship under the watchful eye of higher authority. The biographical context provides additional warrant for the inference that the "authoritative tutelage" exception was calibrated for Black freedmen. Jerome Loving, Whitman's most authoritative biographer, has shown that in the summer and fall of 1872 Whitman quarreled with friends so belligerently against Black male suffrage that it led to a 10-year silence in his friendship with William Douglas O'Connor: "Whitman's conviction that freedmen should be educated before they were given the

vote clashed with O'Connor's unequivocal dedication to freedom"—including full Black citizenship—"at any price" (Loving 1999, 346). Folsom's recent research into Whitman's negative views of Black political activity in Washington, DC municipal politics between 1865 and 1870 provides further warrant for attributing Whitman's "authoritative tutelage" passage specifically to hesitations about Black citizenship. After DC Black citizens, who obtained the right to vote in 1865, celebrated their role in electing the Radical Republican Sayles Jenks Bowen to the office of mayor in June 1868, Whitman wrote in a letter to his mother,

We had the strangest procession here last Tuesday night, about 3000 darkeys, old & young, men & women ... turned out in honor of *their* victory in electing the Mayor, Mr. Bowen—the men were all armed with clubs or pistols ... there was a string went along the sidewalk in single file with bludgeons & sticks, yelling & gesticulating like madmen—it was quite comical, yet very disgusting & alarming in some respects—They were very insolent, & altogether it was a strange sight—they looked like so many wild brutes let loose. (1961, 34–5)

As Folsom notes, Whitman's "comment about how Bowen's election was '*their* victory' underscores his belief that a major problem with black suffrage was that blacks would vote only in a bloc and would not think as individuals about issues and candidates" (2018, 542–3). Given this biographical context, it is highly probable—if not certain—that the "authoritative tutelage" passage was Whitman's veiled way of making space for the suspension or limitation of Black suffrage until African Americans had education that the white community judged sufficient.

Here it is essential to remember that, even after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, questions remained open about how Congress and the states would write their statutes regulating suffrage and whether—even if legislators could not discriminate on the basis of race—they could do so on the basis of literacy and education. Literacy and educational requirements had the advantage (from their proponents' perspective) of disqualifying large numbers of Black citizens—as well as many recently arrived immigrants and poor whites—without violating the letter of the Fifteenth Amendment (Keyssar 2009, 114–5). Whitman expressed anxieties about enfranchising both recent immigrants and Black freedmen in an 1874 *New York Daily Graphic* article: "As if we had not strained the voting and digestive calibre of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons" (1964, 762).

This interpretation corresponds to the dim view of Black political capacity that Whitman expressed in his 1876 work, *Memoranda during the War*. There, Whitman characterized Reconstruction as "measureless degradation" for white southerners: "the black domination, but little above the beasts." Whitman agreed

<sup>9</sup> Whitman shared Mill's conviction that British India was a "backward" society requiring benevolent despotism. In 1857, Whitman wrote an editorial for the *Brooklyn Daily Times* stating, "We do not believe the inhabitants of India are capable of self-government, and in consequence are most likely incapable of obtaining freedom" (1932, 156). This shows that even before Reconstruction, Whitman expressly subscribed to the idea of benevolent despotism.



with many former Unionists that this was “admissible” as “a temporary, deserv'd punishment for their Slavery and Secession sins ... but as a permanency of course is not to be consider'd for a moment” (2004, 126).

What conclusion should we draw from the five oblique references to Black suffrage in *Democratic Vistas*—in their abstracted positivity and muted negativity? The most parsimonious reading is that Whitman supported Black suffrage in principle as a logical extension of universal suffrage; at the same time, he opposed it in practice, harboring reservations so deep that he was willing to countenance a period of “authoritative tutelage” for adult freedmen to assure their readiness for citizenship. Whitman knew that democratic principles demanded the extension of suffrage to Black people by virtue of their intrinsic human equality (cf. Erkkilä 1989, 240, 284). At the same time, Whitman believed that political communities had the right to delay or indefinitely suspend suffrage to individuals or groups that they judged insufficiently educated for self-government, so long as that community undertook to provide the requisite education. The evidence indicates that, after the Civil War, Whitman judged Black Americans to be precisely such a politically immature group—one requiring further education before suffrage could be prudently extended.

However, an objection to this conclusion immediately arises. If Whitman's ultimate position on Black suffrage in *Democratic Vistas* is one of practical opposition, why are there any positive references to the Fifteenth Amendment at all? And if Whitman wanted to make space for the relegation of Black citizens to a condition of “authoritative tutelage,” why did he veil that intent in general theoretical language without specific reference to Black people? If there is an anti-Black racial subtext to *Vistas*, in other words, why does it exist only as subtext?

The answer stems from the fact that *Vistas* is engaged in a complicated rhetorical balancing act in which Whitman is trying to reconcile northern white and southern white audiences into a reunited literary constituency; in other words, *Vistas* employs a sectionally reconciliationist literary strategy (Blight 2001; cf. Beltrán 2011, 67–74; Folsom 2018, 548–9). On the one side are defeated Confederates—whom Whitman takes pains throughout *Vistas* to recognize as national brethren. When he recalls his work nursing wounded soldiers during the Civil War, for example, he pays tribute to the Confederate wounded and the courage with which they died (378–9). On the other side are victorious Unionists, including northern abolitionists such as Charles Eldridge, James Redpath, and Francis Sanborn who had championed Whitman's work before the Civil War and still wielded professional power within Whitman's postwar literary world (Reynolds 1995, 453). Any effort Whitman made to appeal to southern whites had to be counterbalanced by an assurance to northern reformers that he was still allied with them on the Unionist side (376, 385).

Whitman portrays North and South—just five years after the war—as complementary, morally equivalent sections, beckoning a new American future in the West

and a regionally composite nationality: “From the north, intellect, the sun of things, also the idea of unswayable justice... . From the south, the living soul, the animus of good and bad, haughtily admitting no demonstration but its own. While from the west comes solid personality, with blood and brawn, and with the deep quality of all-accepting fusion” (385). Nowhere in this celebration of national reunion does Whitman mention Emancipation. He thus makes the telltale move of sectional reconciliationism—reaching out to a southern white audience while working to retain a northern one through systematic sidestepping of the source of sectional conflict: the question of racial equality (Blight 2001).<sup>10</sup>

One final reference to suffrage requires consideration: Whitman's discussion of (white) women's suffrage in *Vistas*. Praising women's capabilities, Whitman envisions women eventually becoming “robust equals ... even practical and political deciders with men.” Women will be as “great” as men “in all departments; or, rather, capable of being so, soon as they realize it, and can bring themselves to give up toys and fictions, and launch forth, as men do, amid real, independent, stormy life” (389). Whitman's conception of “woman” in this passage is implicitly white and relatively affluent, not the poor and working Black (and white) women who—in the words of Maria Stewart—are “compelled” by material necessity “to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles” ([1831] 1995, 29). The women of this passage have “toys and fictions” that they can give up and sufficient social privilege to assert themselves “as men do, amid real, independent, stormy life.” This underestimates the patriarchal domination even privileged women endured in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. But most relevant for our purposes is Whitman's supreme confidence in his own ability to pronounce judgment on U.S. women's abilities, as well as on what he interprets as women's failure to fully press those abilities into autonomous action. Whitman suggests that U.S. (white) women will win the right to vote and participate in politics when—and only when—they exhibit sufficient self-assertion and public vigor, when they show themselves worthy players in “real, independent, stormy life.” Fully in keeping with the democratic patriarchal norms of his time, Whitman assumes men rightfully are the ones to decide when women are ready for political freedom—just as he assumes that white men should decide when Black men are ready. The gendered and racial structures of political domination run parallel (and in the case of Black women, reinforce each other): Whitman concedes in the abstract that all

<sup>10</sup> This analysis offers a partial correction to Gilson (2020). Though Gilson brilliantly illuminates the ways Whitman's postwar work sought to win over white Southerners, she overlooks the fact that Whitman still had to retain his abolitionist audience. This causes her to err in interpreting *Vistas*' first positive reference—the one praising the “latest, widest opening of the doors”—as evidence of Whitman's unreserved support for Black suffrage (2). The deliberately vague first reference is more likely a rhetorical gesture directed at placating the abolitionist North.

women and all Black people should have the right to vote but also assumes that the currently enfranchised political class—white men—must be the ones to judge readiness and determine timing. *Democratic Vistas* thus accepts both white domination and male domination as a necessary status quo—one whose perpetuation may be in principle regrettable but in practice justifiable.

### Necropolitical Immortalism

Where does this leave us on the question of Black people's role in Whitman's vision of westward expansion—the movement toward an empire worthy of immortal literature? The references to universal suffrage suggest that—even if Black people do move west in tandem with American national development—they would still be subject to white political domination. The “authoritative tutelage” passage makes space for white power holders to disenfranchise Black communities. However, the proposition that Whitman even envisioned freed Black people forming a significant part of the westward movement is too sanguine—for the contextual evidence indicates that he assumed Black people would remain in the South and go extinct as a people.

An essential piece of background is Whitman's antebellum Free-Soil vision of the American West as an exclusively white domain. This Free-Soil vision underwrote Whitman's opposition to slavery's extension into new territories: he feared the adverse effect Black slave labor would have on the dignity of white workingmen. Bringing “the dignity of labor down to . . . the level of negro slaves” would sink the western white workingmen to “little above brutishness” (Whitman 2003, 319). In an 1858 *Brooklyn Daily Times* editorial titled “Prohibition of Colored Persons,” Whitman endorsed Oregon's constitutional exclusion of “colored people, either slave or free” from its territorial bounds and took an explicit stand against racial integration:

Who believes that the Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so? As long as the Blacks remain here, how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance for it. (1932, 90)

Did Whitman envision the West after the war as an exclusively white domain? The balance of evidence indicates that he did—for he assumed that African Americans, like American Indians, were a dying people and would not live long enough to coconstitute the West.

Recall Carlyle's horror in “Shooting Niagara?” at the spectacle of “three million absurd Blacks” being emancipated. The postwar United States sought to launch African Americans into a “career of improvement,” but in Carlyle's mind, African Americans were likely to be “‘improved off the face of the earth’ in a generation or two!” (1867, 7–8). Carlyle's expectation of African American degeneration and

extinction in the aftermath of Emancipation was increasingly shared in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. In 1864, Joseph C. G. Kennedy, superintendent of the 1860 Census, predicted Black Americans' “gradual extinction . . . the more rapidly . . . they become diffused among the dominant race” (Kennedy 1864, xi). So prevalent was “the Black disappearance hypothesis” that Frederick Douglass found it necessary to protest in 1869 that—contrary to popular white expectation—Black Americans would not “die out” (Darrity 1994; Douglass 2018, 259–60).

However, Whitman did not share Douglass's confidence in Black demographic durability. In an unpublished note titled “The Problem of the Blacks,” written in the late 1860s or early 1870s, Whitman spoke of the need to “Make a full and plain spoken statement of *the South*—encouraging—the south will yet come up—the blacks must either filter through in time or gradually eliminate & disappear.” The only alternative was Black people developing “in mental and moral qualities and in all the attributes of a leading and dominant race,” but he did not think this last possibility “likely” (Price 1985, 205). The most likely solutions are either (1) Black amalgamation with whites, causing the racially distinctive, genetically recessive qualities of Black people to “filter through,” leading to the disappearance of Black identities or (2) the extinction of Black people.

“The Problem of the Blacks” manuscript is not the only evidence of Whitman's serious entertainment of the idea of Black disappearance. In a second manuscript titled “Of the Black Question”—from approximately 1867—Whitman wrote,

After the tender appeals of the sentimentalist, the eloquence of freedom's hottest orators, and the logic of the politico-economist, comes something else to the settlement of this question—comes Ethnological Science, cold, remorseless, not heeding at all the vehement abstractions of equality and fraternity . . . uninfluenced by Acts of Congress, or Constitutional Amendments—by noiselessly rolling on like the globe in its orbit, like the summer's heat or winter's cold, and settling these things by evolution, by natural selection by certain races . . . helplessly disappearing by the slow, sure progress of laws, through sufficient periods of time. (Sill 1990, 69)

Whitman here prophesies Black “disappearance” by the operation of natural selection. Whitman held fast to the Black disappearance hypothesis until his death. In a conversation with Horace Traubel in 1888, he expressed skepticism about the racially integrative possibilities of racial amalgamation, stating, “I don't believe in it—it is not possible. The n\*\*\*\*r, like the Inj\*\*, will be eliminated: it is the law of races, history, what-not.”<sup>11</sup> A surprised Traubel responded, “That sounds like Darwin.” Whitman answered, “It sounds like me, too” (Traubel 1908, 283; cf. Clark 1955, 51, 68; Reynolds 1995, 470–3).

<sup>11</sup> To spare readers unnecessary pain, I partially delete these racial slurs. They appear unaltered in the original.

There is trace of “Of the Black Question” in *Democratic Vistas*:

Leaving the rest to the sentimentalists, we present freedom as sufficient in its scientific aspects, cold as ice, reasoning, clear and passionless as crystal. Democracy too is law, and of the strictest, amplest kind... Law is the unshakable order of the universe forever; and the law over all, and law of laws, is the law of successions; that of the superior law, in time, gradually supplanting and overwhelming the inferior one. (381)

Democracy discloses scientific order. As democracy progresses, new order supersedes old. It is hard to make out precisely what Whitman means, but there are unmistakable formal similarities between this passage and “Of the Black Question”: the disparagement of the “sentimentalists,” the appeal to “cold” science, the ranking of superior and inferior, the echoes of survival of the fittest. “Of the Black Question” itself promised orderly succession: settlement of “the Black Question” “by natural selection by certain races ... the slow, sure progress of laws.” Though the passage in *Vistas* contains no explicit reference to Black people, it is bracketed by one of Whitman’s considerations of (Black) suffrage. Just before the passage, Whitman writes, “We endow the masses with the suffrage for their own sake ... [then] from another point of view, for the community’s sake” (381). After the passage closes on “the law of successions,” Whitman engages in a “narrative gearshift”—a formal sign, in Morrison’s eyes, of unspoken Black presence (1992, x). The passage that follows is the parenthetical one on “authoritative tutelage,” Whitman’s space of exception to accommodate the suspension of Black men’s (and perhaps others’) right to vote. Whitman’s passage on democracy as “the law of succession” seems to be a veiled way of incorporating ideas from “Of the Black Question” without offending the more racially egalitarian members of his literary constituency. He refers generally to succession, which a subscriber to the Black disappearance hypothesis could interpret as racial succession. Then, like a lawyer arguing in the alternative, Whitman veers to “authoritative tutelage,” as if to say that until the evolutionary process of racial succession plays itself out, the authoritative tutelage exception will secure white political domination.

If this interpretation seems too cynical, notice how it advances the sectionally reconciliationist strategy of *Democratic Vistas*: telegraphing white domination beneath the notice of northern reformers so that they could rejoin their southern white brethren in forward historical movement into the West. The West, in Whitman’s imagination, was increasingly white, decreasingly Indigenous, and non-Black—the site of both American futurity and sectional reconciliation. The recentering of American life in the West would complete the second, economic stage of national development, laying the foundation for the third stage, when immortal poetry would emerge.

The westward developmental movement of *Democratic Vistas* is both immortalist and necropolitical. It is

immortalist because it lays the material ground for the emergence of immortal poetry; it is necropolitical because American identity develops out of Indigenous and Black death. “Necropolitical immortalism”—the projection of an immortal national identity into the future whose realization requires the deaths of some of the nation’s subjects—appears paradoxical until we account for the tendencies of (1) national identity to be sacrificial and (2) national sacrifice to be racially unequal (Allen 2004; Pool 2021; Stow 2017).

In the “Funeral Oration,” Pericles clarified the relationship between mortal sacrifice, political strength, and immortal glory: Athens’ imperial power and the possibility of transgenerational remembrance compensated citizen-soldiers for military sacrifice. However, the subjects of U.S. political sacrifice are not free and fully fledged citizens but, in the case of Black Americans, civic and social subordinates, and in the case of Native Americans, conquered peoples. Racial eliminationist logics enable white westward movement and consummate American nationality (Wolfe 2006). The developmental trajectory forecloses Black and Native futurity.

Once we observe how the immortal American identity Whitman projects is a white imperial identity—bracketed by anti-Blackness on one side and anti-Indigeneity on the other—the paradox of necropolitical immortalism dissolves. “Racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle,” writes Mbembe; it organizes the “sacrificial economy” (2019, 38). Race determines, in Whitman’s vision, which subnational collectives dwindle in the march to immortal glory. Whitman’s immortalism is a racial project, extending Euro-American settler dynamism even as that dynamism masquerades as unhyphenated American. This racial project is *Democratic Vistas*’ “unspeakable unspoken”: unspeakable because Black and Indigenous death are developmental preconditions for white American glory, unspoken because that glory pretends moral innocence to maintain its own identity (Morrison 2019, 161–97).

## CONCLUSION

*Democratic Vistas* is, in part, the poet’s response to his own mortal anxiety—to his inescapable worry that not only he, Walt Whitman, will be consigned to oblivion but so will his work, his poetry of democracy. This anxiety gets transposed onto the American nation, fueling the book’s call for immortal national literature. The immortalism of *Democratic Vistas*—projecting itself into the future, remorseless in the remainders it generates—overtakes the author’s capacity to recognize his newly enfranchised fellow citizens. In other words, the importance of immortal glory supersedes the importance of the ordinary democratic politics that Black citizens, just a few years from slavery, were beginning to practice. This is where Whitman most loses himself as a democrat. His deflection of attention from ordinary (Black) democratic practice to (white) literary immortality reveals a commitment to imperial

white supremacy deeper than his commitment to democracy. *Democratic Vistas*' immortalism energizes its imperialism. If Whitman had held fast to mortalism, would he have wound up in a different place?

"[W]hite Americans do not believe in death," wrote James Baldwin, "and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them" (Baldwin 1998, 339; cf. Shulman 2008, 145). Baldwin suggests that white Americans fear Black people because Black bodies have come to signify mortal finitude. Black people remind white people of their own mortal embodiment, their own vulnerability to sickness, decay, indignity. In Whitman's time, we see Black and Indigenous bodies take on the specific meaning of evolutionary degradation. The association of Blackness, death, and indigeneity pulsates through *Democratic Vistas* such that the quest for immortal greatness, the constitution of a (non-Black, non-Indigenous) American people, and the westward expansion over the continent and overseas run parallel. Politicized immortalism has deadly consequences, and in the modern era, those deadly consequences are all too likely to be racially unequal.

However, Baldwin's suggestion that white racial fears are existentially tied to the fear of death creates an emancipatory opening: white people can begin to divest themselves of racism by learning to embrace mortal finitude. It is precisely here that *Democratic Vistas*' mortalist portions can help. Recall Whitman's counsel that "A fitly born and bred race ... [would] find it enough merely *to live*—and ... in the fact of life itself, discover and achieve happiness" (416). From this view, mortal life is existentially sufficient; embrace of mortal life on its own death-bound terms releases the individual from the need to dominate—the need to expand oneself beyond one's limits—that expresses itself in immortalism, on the one hand, and white supremacy, on the other. *Democratic Vistas* exposes how immortalism can fuel white supremacy: the longing for a deathless, perfect future spawns disregard for the death-bound, imperfect present. Whitman came to value his own poetic vision of American democratic futurity over the concrete (Black) democratic actors in his midst. Within his half-Hegelian, half-Darwinian historical teleology, Black and Native people fell to the developmental wayside in a march to immortal greatness.

Therefore, the undemocratic side of *Democratic Vistas* makes it an inapt "secular bible"—for it embodies not just temporary historical imperfections but ongoing evasions of Black and Native equality. Yet this does not mean we should cease reading and teaching it. It has great (yet fleeting) democratic moments. Kateb, West, and Frank—among others—are right to uphold those moments as worthy of our attention. But the celebratory vision of *Democratic Vistas* must be counterbalanced by a more somber and sober one—one that acknowledges the book's embeddedness in imperial white supremacist immortalism. When we keep both the best and the worst of the book in view, we have something more valuable than a secular bible. We have a truthful mirror to the United States.

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