



## Constructing the American Identity: Native Americans as Mythological Past

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*The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?  
Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?*  
(“Song of Myself,” Whitman 63)

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* are two works that loom large in the minds and imaginations of Americans. It is quite difficult to get through the American education system without hearing about these two men at least once. Melville and Whitman are a part of the American canon because they sought to develop an identity for America during the most turbulent time in its history: antebellum America and the Civil War. They set out to create an American identity by constructing myths about America’s past. Antebellum America has been seen as a time without toleration for any minority group, namely African Americans. But what most people do not learn about is the intolerance surrounding Native Americans during this time period. Melville and Whitman provide narratives that are inclusive of Native Americans, but are, at the same time, troubling depictions of these people. Melville and Whitman are guilty of reinforcing disconcerting stereotypes and myths about Native Americans—myths that have stayed alive even to this day. Products of their time, despite their willingness to distance themselves from Indian-hating, their constructions of the ideal America through the creation of myths, promote troubling stereotypes and physical descriptions, the belief in the disappearance of Native Americans from this world, and Manifest Destiny.

The creation of national myths is a powerful and uniting tool that both Melville and Whitman were experimenting with. Through their literature, they attempted to construct a myth of America—a combination of its past history

with their visions for a united future. Richard Slotkin in *Regeneration Through Violence* defines great literature as, “at once the apprentice and the master of myth. Its sources are mythic...and it employs metaphors appropriate to the experience of the writer and his audience, his culture, and his people” (Slotkin 517-518). With this definition of literature, the question of Melville and Whitman’s ideal audience becomes central to the success of their myths. After looking at their representations of minority groups, especially Native Americans, it becomes apparent that they were both constructing a myth of America for the white population. The predominant culture is of white Americans, with minority groups representing the ‘other’: their cultures holding a position of awe and fascination in the minds and works of these two authors. Slotkin proposes that Melville achieves the first American epic because, “He draws his symbols...from the primitive myths of the Indians and Pacific Islanders, the lore of whalemens, his own experiences...” and from “nature itself” (Slotkin 538). Melville’s success as a creator of myth also stems from the fact that “[h]e also draws extensively on the mythology nearest the consciousness of his audience, the myths of the western pioneers and hunters” (Slotkin 538). Melville’s white audience would have understood whaling and the significance of the hunter myth, as well as the frontier. Melville uses images that most Americans would have been familiar with in order to create his epic, and is able to construct a myth about the historic past of America.

Likewise, Walt Whitman is striving for a similar unifying force with the myth that he is creating. Whitman is immensely concerned with the notion of progress and tries to unite Americans under the Industrial Revolution and the ways that it affected everyone in the country. For Whitman, the western frontier looms large in his mind and by drawing on the experiences most closely acknowledged by his audience, he, like Melville, is able to create a unifying myth. In his poem “Our Old Feuillage,” Whitman illustrates his desire for a united country and identity:

Singing the song of These, my ever-united lands—my body no/  
more inevitably united, part to part, and made out of a/  
thousand diverse contributions one identity, any more/ than my



lands are inevitably united and made ONE/ IDENTITY.  
(Whitman 149)

In this poem, it becomes apparent that Whitman is trying to unite the entire country under one identity; one of the themes of his life and of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman sees the turbulence of the nation as it becomes divided over slavery and democracy. Since America is such a new country, it has yet to establish a cohesive history, unique folk tradition, or master narrative, which will be seen by everyone as the basis for what is 'truly American'. Also, the United States is not comprised of just one ethnic background, but is full of different ethnicities, immigrants, and cultures. With so much diversity, how can the budding nation compete with the histories and powers of the older, more established, European countries if it does not possess a cohesive and unique identity? This is a question that Whitman, as well as Melville, is struggling to answer. An answer to the question they are grappling with lies in the unique American experience: the frontier and the interactions with 'primitive' civilizations. Melville and Whitman use the experiences and encounters associated with the frontier to construct a unifying myth and identity for the new nation. This is why Native Americans and the frontier loom large in their minds and works.

Harry Slochower addresses the question of the possibility of an American myth and its participants in his article, "*Moby-Dick*: The Myth of Democratic Expectancy." In regard to whether or not America possesses the qualities that allow for the creation of myth (and mythic visions) Slochower says, "Despite our relatively short historic life, we do possess an indigenous lore. We have our legends of Indians, pioneers, and gold seekers" (Slochower 259). He further asserts that it is "because of the accelerated changes in American life in the wake of rapid technical development [that] the era of the Indian, [and] the adventurous pioneer...[seem] to belong to an immemorial past" (Slochower 259). Slochower also points out that American pioneers faced the task of mastering the land, forests, and rivers so that they could create a new community (Slochower 260). Likewise, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, the pioneers of American literature, are trying to master the diversity



and newness of the America before them, in order to create a unified and democratic identity—differentiating America from its European heritage.

Although these two authors are approaching the problems of their time from different angles (novel vs. prose, largest creature on earth vs. a leaf of grass) they are constructing very similar visions for America. Melville and Whitman are asking themselves, as well as their American readers, “Who is the ‘American?’” Is it, as Slochower asks, the New Englander, the chivalrous southerner, the western rancher, “the Indian, the Negro, and the foreigner”, or is it the Quakers and other religious groups? (Slochower 261-262). Melville and Whitman, if asked this question, would say that the American is all of the above. Melville illustrates this with his ship, the *Pequod*, which employs men from every corner of the world. There are people from the South Seas, like Queequeg, from Africa, like Daggoo, and all across the United States. Each man on the *Pequod* works in harmony with respect for one another. There is no significant conflict on the *Pequod* resulting from interactions between various cultures, but only between Mr. Starbuck and Captain Ahab, who are both from Nantucket. This is one of the ways that Melville shows that there can be harmony amongst different peoples and different cultures in America, but it is the white men, those who consider themselves the ‘most American,’ that are creating the problems on the ship—and ultimately the problems in the United States.

Walt Whitman also imagines an America where diversity creates harmony, and where everyone can become united in love and fraternity. Whitman accomplishes this unity by ignoring distinctions between people and literally becoming the poet of everyone. Whitman, in “Song of Myself,” claims, “I am large, I contain multitudes” (Whitman 77). With this, Whitman means that he contains everyone and everything because he attempts to become the poet of America, and to do that he must be diverse and contain the multitudes of the American people. America, as stated before, does not have just one identity, but multiple identities amongst multiple cultures. Whitman, in order to create a unified vision of America, ends up contradicting himself, but he explains that

away because the people in America, due to their diversity, are contradictory. With this theme, Whitman in, “Song of Myself,” claims “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise/.../ Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man” (Whitman 39). Whitman also shows his embrace of the diversity that is uniquely American when he says, “I resist any thing better than my own diversity” (Whitman 40). It is here that Whitman seems to dispel the worries that Slochower brings up in the conclusion of his article: “There is danger that our unity will become petrified into airless conformity and that our freedom will disintegrate into capriciousness” (Slochower 269). Although Whitman is constructing a vision of America where he is everyone, he is not trying to get rid of diversity, but is trying to embrace it as the identity of America. There is a danger that comes about when saying that everyone is one in the same, but for Whitman it is this diversity that makes America beautiful, and he ultimately resists any form that will eradicate that beauty for the result of a more ‘perfect’ union. Whitman also claims in “Song of Myself” that he “will not have a single person slighted or left away” (Whitman 41).

Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, in their desire to embrace the diversity present in America, to construct an American identity, and to create a truly American myth used various portrayals of Native Americans in *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*. Unfortunately, these depictions of Native Americans are stereotypical and become examples of the paternalistic views white Americans held when dealing with ‘noble savages’. Even the physical descriptions of Native Americans that appear in the two works are problematic because they play into the ‘other’ that was a large part of antebellum America. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville provides one example of a ‘real’ Native American in the character of Tashtego. The appearance of Tashtego is noted by the following physical description:

Tashtego’s long, lean, sable hair, his high cheekbones, and black rounding eyes—for and Indian, Oriental in their largeness, but Antarctic in their glittering expression—all of this sufficiently proclaimed him an inheritor of the unvitiated blood of those proud warrior hunters, who, in quest of the great New

England moose, had scoured, bow in hand, the aboriginal  
forests of the main. (Melville 106)

This description of Tashtego is problematic because it upholds the idea of Native Americans as 'natural' warriors and hunters; a stereotype that has, as historian Colin Calloway notes, "frequently earned them [natives] assignments that placed them in the thick of danger" resulting in their contribution of "a disproportionately high rate of casualties relative to total losses" in wars throughout history ("White People" 116). Throughout various wars (including the War of 1812 and the Civil War) Native Americans have been active participants, and due to this idea of them as "natural warriors" they have been thrust into battles without military training. Calloway notes that this stereotypical idea of Native Americans has even contributed to losses for similar reasons in World Wars 1 and 2. This is an idea that has become a part of our national myth, and is a myth about Native Americans that is still promulgated in 'modern times'.

Calloway also notes in his book, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal Peoples and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America*, that, "Europeans said war and hunting were the only things that Indian men esteemed... Their 'whole business' was war and hunting" (Calloway 90). He also notes that, "Depictions of tribal peoples as inherently warlike and living in a state of perpetual violence said more about the agendas of colonial powers than about tribal realities" (Calloway 90). In other words, it was ideas such as this one that allowed for the colonial powers to complete their civilizing agendas and lead to the decimation, control, and eradication of indigenous peoples. Although Melville is trying to create an America that is not only tolerant of Native Americans, but inclusive of them, his very descriptions of Tashtego paint him as an 'other' and turn into myth the very stereotypes that are seen in America to this day.

Tashtego is also described as "nimble as a cat" and as a "wild Indian" (Melville 270). Later on in *Moby-Dick*, Tashtego takes on a more menacing depiction during the episode on the *Pequod* with corpusants: "The parted

mouth of Tashtego revealed his shark-white teeth, which strangely gleamed as if they too had been tipped by corpusants..." (Melville 381). Although this picture of Tashtego is troubling, it serves to remember that it is Ishmael who is telling the story, that he is an unreliable narrator, and possibly insane. Ishmael's description of Tashtego here can be read as proof of his lost sanity (since the description radically changes) but also as Melville's critique of the fears white Americans had of Native Americans to be insane, unrealistic, and unfounded.

*Leaves of Grass* also provides many troubling physical depictions of Native Americans. In section 10 of "Song of Myself" Whitman describes the marriage between the trapper and, "a red girl" or a Native American (Whitman 33). In this section, he says of the bride, "She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight/ locks descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach'd to/ her feet" (Whitman 33). Although this description does not seem to be problematic outright, the Native American woman is immediately sexualized as having "voluptuous limbs." Her hair "coarse" and descending to "her feet" hint at her 'savage' nature. It hints that the Native woman does not have fine hair, like most 'civilized' women would have, but has hair that is reminiscent of African Americans in its texture. During this time, African Americans were slaves and seen as less than human. By making this comparison to an African-American stereotype, it suggests that Native Americans were also less human than whites and, like other minorities, were worthy of exploitation. Her bare head also shows that she is different from the 'civilized' women of America who would generally keep their heads covered with bonnets or hats. This description of the Native American women plays into the idea that natives were 'savage' and childlike, not yet civilized, but having the potential to progress. Also, the sexualization of the Native American women plays into the idea that white men viewed Native American women as their playthings. White male settlers raped many native women and there was little to no repercussion for those actions. Whitman is unwittingly playing into this acknowledgement of the hyper-sexualization of minority female bodies when he describes the Native



American bride. It is important to note that Whitman, as well as Melville, are products of their time period, and because of that, despite how progressive they might try to be, they cannot fully dissociate from prominent stereotypes and strains of thought.

Stereotypes, fueled by these physical descriptions of Native Americans, find their way into both Melville and Whitman's works. Chapter 122 of *Moby-Dick* feeds into a troubling stereotype of Native Americans as drunkards. The chapter is quoted here in its entirety:

Midnight Aloft—Thunder and Lightning (The Main-top-sail yard.—Tashtego passing new lashings around it.) 'Um, um, um. Stop that thunder! Plenty too much thunder up here. What's the use of thunder? Um, um, um. We don't want thunder; we want rum; give us a glass of rum. Um, um, um!' (Melville 385)

This chapter is so short that it seems almost as if it is a last minute throw-in. The action of this chapter does nothing to forward along the plot line. It raises questions as to what the purpose is: is it for comedic relief, to show the humanness of Tashtego, to further develop his character, or to promote stereotypes? Whatever the purpose for this chapter, it does indeed fulfill the stereotype of Native Americans as alcoholics. The use of the alcohol, rum, is an indicator that this chapter is not as harmless as it seems.

Rum was a problem for many tribes because it led to drunkenness amongst many native men. Native Americans felt helpless at the importation of rum and did not know how to stop its hold on their young men. Many native leaders turned to European powers to ask them to stop bringing rum into their populations. The Choctaw Chief told John Stuart in 1772 that, "I must Complain of the great Quantities of Rum carried into our Towns it is what distracts our Nation we wish to see a Stop put to this pernicious Practice" (Calloway "World Turned upside down" 142). Captain Ouma of Seneacha, at the same hearing, said, "I am now to tell you the Cause of all disorder and Quarreling between us and our white men. It is Rum" (Calloway "World" 144). Rum was undermining tribal power and the power of chiefs. They could no longer control their young men, and the traders were beginning to gain more



power in the tribes than the chiefs themselves. This was a problem and rum can be seen as one of the causes for tension between natives and white settlers. Not all Native Americans were drunkards, but many natives did fall victim to alcoholism and rum was the drink of choice that traders were peddling. With this knowledge, Chapter 122 is no longer a harmless cry for rum, but harkens back to a larger history of the power and destruction that rum played amongst native communities.

Another stereotype that is played into is that of the Native American that is at one with nature. This is seen during the chase for Moby Dick. After Moby Dick has submerged during the chase on the first day, it is Tashtego who notices Moby Dick's reappearance to the surface: "The birds!—the birds!" cried Tashtego. In long Indian file, as when herons take wing, the white birds were now all flying towards Ahab's boat..." (Melville 409). It is not significant that Tashtego is the first person to see Moby Dick resurface, but it becomes significant once the stereotype of "Indian file" enters into the equation. Melville could have said single file, but he chose to point out the ethnicity of Tashtego as a Native American. This allusion to Indians calls attention to the fact that it was Tashtego, and not other members of the *Pequod*, that found Moby Dick. Tashtego, who, by being an Indian, and supposedly at one with nature, was able to recognize the movements of the birds as a signaling of the reappearance of Moby Dick. This stereotype of the native that is a part of nature also plays into the same stereotype that Native Americans are natural born warriors. It points to the otherness of natives in America and to the stereotype of natives as natural-born hunters.

*Leaves of Grass* also falls into the problem of perpetuating stereotypes while still trying to promote the importance of Native Americans to the national myth of America. In "Our Old Feuillage," Walt Whitman starts off his description of the Iroquois with the stereotype of Native Americans having a peace talk: "In arriere the peace-talk with the Iroquois the aborigines, the/ calumet, the pipe of good-will, arbitration, and/ indorsement,/ The sachem blowing the smoke first toward the sun and then/ toward the earth," (Whitman

147). With these lines, it becomes apparent that Whitman is providing a description of Native American culture, painting it in a positive light. Here, the poetry of the act of smoking the peace pipe becomes apparent. However, he follows up those lines with the following:

The drama of the scalp-dance enacted with painted faces and/  
guttural exclamations,/ The setting out of the war-party, the  
long and stealthy march,/ The single file, the swinging hatchets,  
the surprise and/ slaughter of enemies;/ All the acts, scenes,  
ways, persons, attitudes of these States,/ reminiscences,  
institutions... (Whitman 147)

These lines contrast greatly with the lines that precede it. Native Americans are no longer peaceful, but violent savages that have a “scalp-dance” and go out on war parties. Here we also see a depiction of Native Americans walking in “single file”, “swinging hatchets” and surprising their enemies. Natives are not painted in a positive light here, but are seen as stealthy and sneaky, ganging up on their enemies, slaughtering them, and using primitive weaponry such as “hatchets” instead of guns. The killing of enemies is depicted as brutal, worthy of the savage title that Native Americans have been given. From the beginning of trade between indigenous groups and whites, there was the trade of weapons, such as guns. Many natives exploited the new technology and used it to gain power over other tribes in the surrounding areas. The times of war parties where hatchets were the only weapons used was not a part of history that Whitman would have known. Interestingly enough, Whitman follows up this savage depiction by claiming that this is what makes up the “attitudes of the United States.” Whitman is accepting the history of Native Americans, turning it into a stereotypical myth, and equating it to a national, uniquely American, identity.

Although *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* have their problems, they do attempt to move away from these stereotypes. Melville calls attention to the superstitious nature that many first settlers had of Native Americans by saying that, “To look at the tawny brawn of his [Tashtego’s] lithe snaky limbs, you would almost have credited the superstitions of some of the earlier Puritans,



and half believed the wild Indian to be a son of the Prince of the Powers of the Air" (Melville 106). By doing this, Melville sets the crew of the *Pequod* apart from the rest of the superstitious United States. Puritans are known for their intolerance of other peoples and religions. By saying "almost credited" and "half believed," it becomes apparent that Melville is drawing a distinction between his progressive means of thought and older, intolerant beliefs. Melville is constructing an America that is inclusive, and by doing this, he distances himself from persecutory peoples and illustrates that tolerance is key to a united American identity.

Similarly, in his poem "Salut Au Monde," Whitman states, "I see the constructiveness of my race,/ I see the results of perseverance and industry of my race,/ I see ranks, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, I go among them,/ I mix indiscriminately,/ And I salute all the inhabitants of the earth" (Whitman 123). Whitman acknowledges that there are differences amongst the races. Following along with the predominant ideas surrounding progress and civilized nations, Whitman deviates from that thought in order to salute "all inhabitants of the earth." By doing this, Whitman draws the line between the stereotypes of progressed and un-progressed peoples, acknowledges that those thoughts exist, and then disregards it by walking amongst all "ranks, colors, barbarism, [and] civilizations." He mixes with everyone and acknowledges their right to exist on this earth, for they are its "inhabitants." Although Whitman uses troubling language, his point still comes across: there must be tolerance and equality, despite differences, if America is to stay unified and create its own identity. According to Gene Bluestein, author of article, "The Advantages of Barbarism: Herder and Whitman's Nationalism," "[It] was necessary for Whitman to demonstrate that, underlying the vastness and diversity of America, there was indeed some basis for communal or national unity" (Bluestein 123).

Another myth that both Melville and Whitman perpetuate in their works is that of the disappearing native. Although Native Americans did suffer massive population loss due to diseases brought over from Europe and events like the Cherokee Trail of Tears, they were in no way a 'dying breed'. Even to this day,



natives are almost gone from the public mind and exist only in the myths of Indians that we see on TV and in movies. Native Americans are well and alive and even had a cultural revival during the 1970s with the American Indian Movement (AIM).

In *Moby-Dick*, the first description readers are given of Tashtego is that he was “an unmixed Indian from Gay Head, the most westerly promontory of Martha’s Vineyard, where there still exists the last remnant of a village of red men, which has long supplied the neighboring island of Nantucket with many of her most daring harpooners” (Melville 106). Tashtego is the last of his kind, one of the pure-blooded Native Americans that has missed inter-marriage (like Whitman’s red girl and trapper) and has held onto his culture. Native Americans actually did make up a large part of the Nantucket whaling ship’s harpooners and officers. Nancy Shoemaker, in her article “Mr. Tashtego: Native American Whalers in Antebellum New England” points out that many of the “colored men” that were “among the officers and boatsteerers [of the *Samuel & Thomas*] (petty officers whose duties included harpooning whales)...[were] all Wampanoag natives of Gay Head” (Shoemaker 110). Many native men willingly went into whaling because it offered them a “viable living” (Shoemaker 114). This is probably one of the reasons that Melville created Tashtego and made him a part of the Gay Head community at Martha’s Vineyard. But it is troubling that Tashtego is made out to be a dying breed—a part of American history that will not be around much longer. When creating a myth of American identity, Melville runs into the problem as to what will happen if natives were to ‘die out’ and actually fade away into myth. They lose their ability to speak for themselves, and the stereotypes that Melville paints end up becoming increasingly upsetting.

However, Melville counters this idea of the disappearing native by acknowledging that native lives are important, stand for something, and need to be respected in this new vision of America. When the *Pequod* encounters the *Bachelor*, Captain Ahab said to the other Captain, “Thou art too damned jolly. Sail on. Hast lost any men?’ ‘Not enough to speak of—two islanders, that’s all;

—but come aboard...” (Melville 375). This reply of the *Bachelor's* captain shows that there is a stark disregard for non-white lives. Melville is making the ironic point that, in this world, there are lives that are worth more than others; or at least people that believe that certain lives are worth more. This is seen as a critique of antebellum society that does not value the life of the ‘other’ and has allowed for atrocities to be committed against Native Americans, resulting in their ‘disappearance.’

Whitman sees Native Americans as a disappearing people more than Melville does. In his poem “Yonnondio” Whitman best illustrates his belief of their disappearance for he states:

I see swarms of stalwart chieftains, medicine-men, and/  
warriors,/ As flitting by like clouds of ghosts, they pass and are  
gone in/ the twilight,/ (Race of the woods, the landscapes free,  
and the falls!/ No picture, poem, statement, passing them to the  
future:)/ Yonnondio! Yonnondio!—unlimn'd they disappear  
(Whitman 440).

Whitman does not see Native Americans as having any place in the future of America, despite his attempts to create an American identity for *all* people. He says that no poem will pass “them to the future” which is interesting, since Whitman is trying to construct an inclusive identity for America. This alludes to the fact that the only position Whitman can see Native Americans in is in the mythological history of America, and not necessarily the vision of the future. For Whitman, Native Americans will utterly disappear from the American landscape like “clouds of ghosts” into “the twilight”.

This is disconcerting for it too, and more strongly than *Moby-Dick*, allows for the mythologizing of an entire race by white men who do not understand native culture and customs, and can say whatever they want to say about natives, without fear of being challenged. A disappearing people allows for the ultimate creation of myth, for it allows people to hearken back with nostalgia to a past they cannot understand but acknowledge as their own. In section 16 of Whitman’s poem “Starting from Paumanok” he asserts that natives will charge “the water and the land with names” before “they melt, [and] depart” from the



United States (Whitman 24). Whitman shows a fascination with Native American names and culture, but he does not see a place for them in the modern world, in his vision for a unified America. The only future that Whitman sees for natives is in the names that they give the land. In his future, the only place for natives is in the myth of America and its historical past. He sees natives as fading away, their only trace found in the language and names of America.

Additionally, Manifest Destiny is a disconcerting mindset that both Melville and Whitman promulgate in their works, and it is also one of the beliefs that led to the 'disappearance' of Native Americans and the attempted destruction of their culture. According to Julius W. Pratt, "[One] can hardly read a work on the history of the United States in the two decades before the Civil War without meeting the phrase "Manifest Destiny," widely used as a convenient statement of the philosophy of territorial expansion in that period" (Pratt 795). In his article "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny'," Pratt traces the first use of the term in a speech to the House of Representatives about the acquisition of Oregon territory in 1846. In this hearing, Winthrop says that their claim to Oregon territory is, "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us..." (Pratt 796). In other words, Americans held the belief that it was their God-given right to possess the entire continent of America because they brought the promise of democracy and equality for all (all whites, that is). Manifest Destiny led to the expansion of the United States from the East coast to the West coast, and essentially created the history of the United States. The U.S. went to war with Mexico in 1846 because of the idea of its divine right to expansion. Manifest Destiny led to the dispossession of natives from their lands, and allowed for America to become the country that it is to this day.

Chapter 89 of *Moby-Dick*, entitled "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish," is a perfect example of Manifest Destiny. In this chapter, Ishmael describes the "laws and regulations of the whale fishery" (Melville 307) by discussing what it



means to have a “Fast-Fish” and a “Loose-Fish” and which whales can be captured – depending on their status. As Ishmael clearly states, “A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it” and “A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it” (Melville 308). In other words, if a whale is attached in any way to a ship, or if it has that ship’s marker stuck into it, it is a “Fast-Fish” and belongs to the ship that has claimed it. Towards the end of this chapter, Ishmael makes the connection of whaling to Manifest Destiny in America when he says, “What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress?... What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish” (Melville 310). In other words, Ishmael is saying that any ‘un-claimed’ country can be claimed by a European (or American) power and become a colony. This idea is saddening because technically Native Americans have claim to the lands of America, for they had been living there for thousands of years before Europeans came. Also, in regard to Mexico, which is a country inhabited by people, it too is considered a “Loose-Fish,” ready for the taking by the United States. This idea of countries being “Loose-Fish” is something that would never happen amongst European countries. This plays into the idea that indigenous groups are not ‘progressed’ enough, and are not utilizing the land effectively. Calloway asserts that, “people held tribal lands in common, although individuals had personal property” (“World” 5). This communal land use was different from the European view on land and its proper use: “Europeans...insisted on owning the land. Land was now a commodity that could be transferred and property from which others could be excluded” (“World” 5). Because natives had different conceptions of land use, Europeans did not acknowledge their possession of the land, and therefore considered the Americas as “Loose-Fish.” When an entire group’s lifestyle is seen as irrelevant and inferior to European culture, it allows for atrocities to be committed without a second thought.

In section 4 of “Starting From Paumanok” Whitman seems to be creating a new Manifest Destiny, but a destiny for his poetry for he says, “Take my leaves America, take them South and take them/North,/ Make welcome for





them everywhere, for they are your own/ offspring...” (Whitman 14). Whitman is asking America to spread his poetry, his vision for American, and his version of democracy to the rest of the world. He wishes for them to be made welcome “everywhere.” In a way, Whitman is supporting colonization because he wants these ideas to spread. Colonialism has the habit of routing out the culture, ideas, and language of one group and replacing it with the imposed values, culture, and ideas of the colonizing group—effectively destroying the other group’s identity. Although Whitman is not promoting violence or an insidious imposition of culture, he is still asking and desiring his ideas to be spread throughout the world, which, in order for it to happen, will be another form of colonialism. Further on, Whitman asks for the precedents to “connect lovingly with them [the leaves, i.e. his poems], for they/ connect lovingly with you” (Whitman 14). Whitman wants everyone to be able to connect with his poems, because he feels that they connect with everyone else. Whitman tried to put a little bit of everything in his poems, but I do not believe that Native Americans would have been able to connect to his poems—and if they can, it means that there has been a loss of culture.

In contrast to his seeming support of Manifest Destiny, in “Our Old Feuillage” Whitman says, “Always the West with strong native persons, the increasing/ density there, the habitants, friendly, threatening, ironical,/ scorning invaders” (Whitman 145). This quote contrasts with the earlier example of Manifest Destiny because it acknowledges that white settlers are “invaders”, in essence people that do not belong in the lands held by Native Americans. This can be viewed as a way that Whitman tries to make himself more accessible to all people. By acknowledging the strength of natives, he is acknowledging their right to occupy the West. Many Americans held that the land to the West of the Mississippi was “Indian territory.” With the Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed into effect by President Andrew Jackson, all native people were to be removed from their tribal lands East of the Mississippi and given lands to the West as compensation. This removal led to the forced removal of the Cherokees, known as the Trail of Tears in 1838, and the removal of other native tribes.

Because of this removal and guarantee of land west of the Mississippi, many native groups did become “threatening” and did “scorn invaders” that tried to take away their lands (again). Manifest Destiny was a driving factor for the occupation of native lands from ‘sea to shining sea’ and led to their systematic removal. Whitman was aware of the atrocities of the forced removal, and how native groups felt about it, which is why he would acknowledge that white settlers were in fact invaders of the West. Although he makes these concessions, he still supports unchecked progress of the nation and Manifest Destiny over the rights of Native Americans to their tribal lands. Critic Henry Nash Smith, in his article “Walt Whitman and Manifest Destiny,” says that Walt Whitman was actually an, “enthusiastic American nationalist and a believer in the confused but exciting doctrines of Manifest Destiny” (Smith 373). Smith also argues that, “Whitman has adopted the theory of a westward course of empire, soon to culminate with the emergence of an American empire as a consequence of the American advance to the Pacific” (Smith 379). Although Whitman claims to embrace diversity and to be the poet of a newly emerging America, his poetry is in itself a form of Manifest Destiny and greatly reflects the problems associated with that doctrine.

Herman Melville and Walt Whitman are two great American writers that aimed at constructing a unique identity for America. Because the country was newly forming and was the premiere democratic experiment for the world, many Americans saw the importance in breaking away from Europe and creating an identity all of its own—throwing off its colonial identity in the process. In order for Melville and Whitman to create an unique identity for America, they needed to construct myths about the origins of this country. Native Americans provided a basis for this myth and also helped create the idea of the threatening frontier that needed to be secured through occupation. Although Melville and Whitman attempted to create an America that was inclusive of all peoples, that idea was not always reflected in the depictions of Native Americans in *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*. Melville does a much better job at depicting natives as human and is more inclusive of them in his vision of America than Whitman is.



This is probably because Melville had more interactions with natives than Whitman did. Whitman's poems are another version of Manifest Destiny and do not have an inclusive vision of Native Americans in the future, but looks at them with fascination and awe, and as a part of this country's past. Although Melville and Whitman can be seen as progressive for their time period in their acceptance (and celebration if you're Whitman) of Native Americans, they are both products of their time and are incapable of fully separating themselves from the stereotypes surrounding Native Americans. Considering that *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass* are seen as iconic examples of American literature and identity, and the ways in which these two authors and works have successfully infiltrated the American mind and culture, these stereotypical depictions of Native Americans become dangerous. Native Americans become mythologized and forced into images that we still have to this day. Native Americans are still remembered as 'savages' who swing hatchets, have war cries, wear face paint, use bows and arrows, and ride horses. Movies, such as Disney's *Pocahontas*, still perpetuate the myth and stereotypes of Native Americans that Melville and Whitman depict in their works. Many still believe in the myth of the disappearing native and this leads to the continual representation of native stereotypes in pop-culture.

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