



Raabe, Wesley, ed., "walter dear": The Letters from Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Her Son Walt

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list racism, which shouldn't be so unfamiliar to us today. While Whitman's attitude toward Black Americans cannot simply be reduced to these politics, understanding the logic of Free Soilers goes a long way toward explaining the nature of his white supremacy.

Finally, *Whitman Noir* includes a useful annotated selected bibliography of writings dealing with Whitman and blackness. One essay that stands out in this final list is Folsom's seminal "Ethiopia and Lucifer: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After" (2000). Indeed, several of the pieces in this collection—including Folsom's own—appear to rotate in the orbit of that earlier essay. The authoritative manner in which it dealt with Whitman on race has laid, along with Martin Klammer's *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (1995), the groundwork for the first half of *Whitman Noir*. Readers can also find here the paper trail of Langston Hughes's deep appreciation of Whitman's poetry, and his early (1953) defense of Whitman's art against accusations of racism.

Whitman Noir serves as a welcome rejoinder to McNair's plea that "we have an honest discussion about the relevance" of Whitman's racism to his poetry. For better or worse, this collection remains at times as contradictory as Walt was, its strength of eclecticism also being its weakness. For me one of this book's great pleasures was in being led outside of it to read poets like Komunyakaa and Dunbar for the first time. For any reader under-versed in the African American literary tradition, Wilson provides a constellation of authors offering an expansive sense of how Whitman is, indeed, our American poet. These essays at their best lay further stepping-stones toward "the authentic New World vision" Jordan herself discovered, weirdly and commonly enough, through reading Whitman (157).

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WESLEY RAABE, ed. "walter dear": *The Letters from Louisa Van Velsor Whitman to Her Son Walt*. *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. whitmanarchive.org, 2014.

The Walt Whitman Archive now offers the most comprehensive representation of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman's life and thought to date. As if anticipating the question "In what ways does Louisa Van Velsor's life merit careful critical attention?," Wesley Raabe, the editor of Louisa's letters to Walt recently published on the *Archive*, answers in his long and illuminating introductory essay: "The full range of her letters exert their own gravity: they move the center of orbit in family correspondence from Walt to his mother, they highlight her wide range of social interactions and her verbal inventiveness in spite of the grating burden of financial dependence, they illuminate some familiar phrases in Walt's poetry and correspondence, and they may invite scholars to reconsider the impetus for Walt's first post-Civil War revision of *Leaves of Grass*." Raabe goes on to propose that another merit of Louisa's letters "is that they are a rare extended record of the life of a working-class woman during

the Civil War and Reconstruction.” And Raabe offers a powerful justification for devoting such a substantial section of the *Whitman Archive* to Louisa: “The digital archive that bears the poet’s name now encompasses another, his mother Louisa, whose letters may best serve those readers who heed his great poem, and who, upon failing to fetch him at first, should keep encouraged, who missing him in one place should search another.”

Raabe warns us that, in his notes to the letters, he will repeat brief information on each Whitman family member “because many who access this part of the Archive do so searching for one distinct letter.” Therefore, he says, “it is necessary that each reader has the whole as well as the part.” True enough, but it is lamentable that some readers are “searching for one distinct letter,” because the only way a reader can truly *hear* Louisa’s voice—and voice is as important as (and, at times, more important than) content—is by reading her letters one after the other: full immersion. While reading Louisa’s 170 letters and Raabe’s annotations along with his introductory essay, I finally had but two reservations among the otherwise extreme admiration I felt for his work.

Because Louisa’s voice is so vital, I believe it is important when writing about her to use as many of her own words as possible. I would have liked to hear more of Louisa’s words in Raabe’s essay, more lines from Louisa’s letters to exemplify points, as when Raabe quotes her “litany of inventive formulas of thanks” to Walt. At such moments, I could hear Louisa. And yet, I hesitate to complain because, unlike many previous Whitman scholars, Raabe so consistently honors Louisa. Writing about the gifts for which Louisa is offering her litany of thanks, Raabe says, “The small gifts that Walt enclosed helped his mother to maintain a semblance of personal dignity. . . .”

My second reservation has to do with Raabe’s phrase “move the center of orbit,” quoted earlier. Raabe certainly does not make Louisa a footnote to Walt, and as I applaud that, it may seem wrong for me to want Raabe to put more of Whitman’s work in the context of Louisa’s letters. Still, I wanted Raabe to examine more closely Whitman’s key publishing moments when those moments coincided with Louisa’s letters. Though there are only three 1860 letters, I wanted to hear a bit about the third edition of *Leaves*, which was appearing at the time of the letters. The fourth edition of 1867 and the fifth edition of 1870-1871 could also have received more note, especially given that Raabe has indicated that the letters throw light on the post-war editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

The last ten pages of Raabe’s essay provide readers with information regarding his editorial practice and how it fits in with the *Archive* as a whole. Raabe notes the various editors of the Whitman family correspondence who previously edited some of Louisa’s letters and then goes into detail about his own methods. He tells us he has revised the date-range or dates for seventy-one letters. Twenty-seven letters in this collection had not been previously listed. Raabe has a searching and inventive mind, which is evident throughout the introductory essay and notes, and he is meticulous in his tracking of the dates of Louisa’s letters.

Raabe's annotations, in a way, form a second essay; they provide valuable historical, political, cultural, medicinal, and scientific information. As a Brooklyn resident, I delighted in all of the Brooklyn references and links, as well as information about and links to many periodicals. And, if I need to read one of Jeff's letters to gain more context, it is a click away.

Raabe explains how he handles Louisa's non-standard punctuation and uses felicitous phrasing in speaking of Louisa's use of the stray end-parenthesis: "Her mark signals a brief stay before the headlong rush of thought returns." Raabe also takes care to provide readers with detailed information as to when and where and why his own editorial marks are placed where they are and goes on to explain that if the superscript used in the transcriptions bothers a reader, she or he can choose to read the letters in the photographic scans the Archive provides. Again, Raabe provides readers specific information about what they are encountering in his transcriptions: "Because digital images of manuscript letters from Louisa to Walt have been acquired for all letters, in no case do transcriptions in this edition rely on manuscript book type transcriptions (with two minor exceptions) or previously edited texts of the letters." After then offering a section on secondary materials, Raabe ends his essay with a generous and detailed section of acknowledgements. This edition of letters is a model of scholarly editing practices.

What Raabe's work gives us, finally, is the opportunity to hear Louisa and to know her in ways that we have previously only been able to glimpse. We can follow, for example, her careful tracking of Walt's work. She mentions, early in her letters, reading reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, but by far her most impressive response was to Anne Gilchrist's "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," which appeared in the *Radical*, May, 1870. In a May 17?-June 12?, 1870, letter to Walt, Louisa says: "that Lady seems to understand your writing better than ever any one did before as if she could see right through you." Louisa thus astutely recognized what Raabe describes as "one of the first great critical readings of Whitman's work." Three years earlier, in an August 1, 1867, letter, Louisa comments on William D. O'Connor's 1866 book on Whitman, *The Good Gray Poet*, revealing her sensitivity to voice: "i like his writings the good gray poet better than i doo borroug[hs?] book Oconers shows the spirit its wrote in i should form an idea of the man if i had never seen him by reading his writing[.]" ("borroug[hs?]" is, of course, John Burroughs, who wrote *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person* [1867].) Louisa goes on to mention a "peice in the sunday times," which Raabe tells us was "an unsigned . . . reprint of William Michael Rossetti's review."

We can also trace a back-and-forth echoing of diction between Louisa and Walt. Louisa begins her July 1, 1868, letter to Walt, as was her custom, by acknowledging Walt's letter and thanking him for the writing material and money order he had sent: " i got your letter yesterday and the money order and magazine and two papers all very good it will last me some time to read I like to have something on hand to read . . . i like very much to have something to read) . . . well walter dear as every body asks every body how are you going to spend the 4th . . . it dont seem like a year since we moved here but time comes round." Louisa often articulates circularity, not always using

the locution “comes round.” This particular time-phrase, though, resounds in Whitman’s “Song of Prudence”: “The interest will come round—all will come round.” Then, there is Louisa’s line in her February 11, 1873, letter to Walt: “if we had a home walt you might loaf as long as you wanted to,” and, in a June 20, 1867, letter, Louisa, as she often does, gives Walt a report on his brother George: “he was here to breakfast this morning but felt as if he would like to loaf and live at his ease.” (Here, of course, she is echoing “Song of Myself”: “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.”)

We learn about Louisa’s persistent compulsion to write, as in a March 11, 1868, letter: “but I cant feel satisfied till i write something so much for habit.” There is also the February 27, 1867, letter: “i feel as if i must write a few lines every time i get a letter i cant feel satisfied untill i write sometimes i think its real foolish to write every week but if i dont it seems as if i had something to doo that i had neglected.” In her September 25 or October 2, 1863, letter, she tells Walt: “here goes another Of mothers scientific letters when i get desperate i write commit it to paper as you literary folks say.”

Whitman saw in his mother her innate pride, but he also saw the threats which dependency made on that pride. Louisa had to fight daily to maintain it. Though there was more than one element working to erode Louisa’s sense of self, the most dominant one was money. Her sole source of support was George’s and Walt’s financial help. Son Jeff was a minor player in this regard, and none of the other children helped her out financially. The most wrenching example of this threat of dependency comes in her relationship with George after he returns from fighting in the Civil War, and this threat lasted to her death. Louisa’s December 3, 1865, letter hints at her awareness that George might have started to resent helping fund her. During the Civil War, George would send his soldier’s pay for Louisa to put in the bank, a portion to go in her own bank account and the rest in his. Louisa had scrupulously spent only her share on living expenses, not touching George’s. She tells Walt in this letter that she needed new shoes but that she couldn’t find any that fit and that she didn’t know when she could get any now: “i dont have much money to spend now adays to think i was such A fool as to use all the money i had in the bank and save the other now i want it and wish i had saved my own George is good enoughf and gives mone[y?] when i ask him but Walt you know how i dislike to ask and there is so many little things to take money that young men that never had A family dont think off but i might be very much worse off but i get kind of down hearted sometimes.”

A week later, Louisa appears to “be very much worse off” when she thanks Walt for the two dollars he sent, which came after the following took place: “at noon i hadent one cent and i asked georgee to give me 50 cents and after looking for a considerable time he laid me down 50 cents well Walt i felt so bad and child like i cried.” Louisa goes on to speak of George’s moodiness and of the change in him. She also tries to reassure herself: “sometimes i would think maybee he is tired of having me and Edd and then i would think george is too noble a fellow for that.” But Louisa keeps writing about George’s disturbing transformation. In her May 31, 1866, letter, she notes: “he has got to be

very economical very different from when he was in the army but every body changes some for the better and some for the wors(er).” In Louisa’s December 15, 1867, letter, she informs Walt that “georgee has got nearly over his quiet spell . . . i hope it wont occur again very soon I cant bear to have any body so and not know what is the cause.” But Louisa’s feeling rebuffed doesn’t stop, and she writes in a June 13, 1871, letter to Walt: “but walt for all that George would never see me want i have too high an opinion of him to think he would ever shirk in any way if i was needy).”

Even after George married Louisa Orr Haslam and Louisa had moved to Camden to live with them, she continued to comment on George’s change. In her March 26–28, 1873, letter, she speaks of George’s frugality. In her April 10–15, 1873, letter, two months before she died, Louisa tells Walt that George makes money from several different jobs and more is coming: “so you see walt the more we have the more we want) i suppose if i needed george would help me but he has never given me 50 cents since i have been heere . . . george is more changed in some respects than i could ever believe.”

Louisa uses words like “dignity,” “pride,” “respect” off and on throughout her letters. When her fifth child Andrew died, she described in a December 4, 1863, letter to Walt the preparations for burial she, George, Jeff, and Mattie (Jeff’s wife) had made: “he is laid in a frock coat of Georges and vest and every thing very respectful plate on his coffin with his age and name . . . i am composed and ca[lm?]” Twelve days later, she tells Walt more: “[the funeral] was conducted with the utmost quietness and respect with no bussell nor confusion . . . altogether it was as far as respectability is).”

Such passages illustrate the priority Louisa gave to pride, but her dealings with George and her financial dependence on him and Walt manifest the difficulty she faced maintaining her dignity. Whitman, privy to his mother’s pain, thus had a concrete referent in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) when he spoke of independence, pride, and self-respect: “We believe the ulterior object of political and all other government . . . to be among the rest, not merely to rule, to repress disorder &c., but to develop, to open up to cultivation, to encourage the possibilities of all beneficent and manly outcroppage, and of that aspiration for independence, and the pride and self-respect latent in all characters.”

Just as Whitman kept stressing that democracy’s realization lies in the future, so too did Louisa’s hopes for independence, pride, and self-respect on any consistent level rest in the future. Whitman’s four portraits of women that he included in *Democratic Vistas* clearly relate to his experiences with Louisa, and, though the images may not look radical or “progressive” today in showcasing the choices each woman had, the choices would have offered hope for Louisa. Whitman says in *Democratic Vistas*, “Of all dangers to a nation . . . there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.” It would be in 1888, long after Louisa’s death, that Whitman would say, “Leaves of Grass is essentially a woman’s book.”

That same year, he told his friend Horace Traubel:

The reality, the simplicity, the transparency of my dear, dear mother's life, was responsible for the main things in the letters as in *Leaves of Grass* itself. How much I owe her! It could not be put in a scale—weighed: it could not be measured—be even put in the best words: it can only be apprehended through the intuitions. *Leaves of Grass* is the flower of her temperament active in me. My mother was illiterate in the formal sense but strangely knowing: she excelled in narrative—had great mimetic powers: she could tell stories, impersonate: she was very eloquent in the utterance of noble moral axioms, she was very original in her manner, her style.

Wesley Raabe's edition of Louisa's letters demonstrates just how right Whitman was in his assessment.

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SHERRY CENIZA

AARON M. MOE, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014. x + 159 pp.

The following Thoreauvian questions have been fundamental to literary ecocriticism: can humans speak for "Nature"? If so, who, and how? In his *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry*, Aaron M. Moe answers, yes, some human poets (including Walt Whitman) can, and they do—first, by paying attention to the behaviors of other animals, and then by translating this alter-species semiotics into human discourse. In the poetry of Whitman, E. E. Cummings, W. S. Merwin, and Brenda Hillman, Moe "explore[s] how an attentiveness to animals contributes to each poet's makings" (22). Moe's insistence, moreover, upon an integral relationship between other-species behavior and human poetic form in these poets renders his contribution to ecocriticism more ambitious than, say, M. Jimmie Killingsworth's 2004 study on Whitman's ecopoetics, *Walt Whitman and the Earth*, in which it is shown that the poet's tropes often reveal a vital connection with the biosphere. For Moe, human poetry is not a "monospecies event," but a "multispecies" one (24); and so "zoopoetics" as critical practice involves "discovering innovative breakthroughs in [poetic] form through an attentiveness to another species' bodily *poiesis*" (10). This is Moe's favorite sentence, since he uses some form of it several times a chapter in describing poems by his four poets. This repetition becomes problematic, however, as the reader eventually wonders if every poem discussed is truly some "innovative breakthrough" in form issuing immediately from observing another animal's semiotics, if such empirical "attentiveness" actually is a *sine qua non* for eco-mindful poetry, and if "bodily *poiesis*" is more than just a dangerously anthropomorphic metaphor in such a critical context.

Moe finds a "commonality" and "continuity" in the "universal rhetoric" of the material body, in the "primacy" of gesture itself (9, 16, 12); a priori to human words is a "*poiesis* shared by many animals" (17). This leads directly to Walt Whitman, since discussion of "the poetics of the human body," as Moe admits, "retrace[s] well-trodden steps in Whitman scholarship" (38). But this move also entails too broad of a conflation of two related but separate points