

The Walt Whitman Connection

In 1855, when Walt Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, his anthology of revolutionary free verse poetry, critics responded harshly, calling it “noxious fumes” and “barbaric yawp.” Perhaps this initial rejection of his poetry, and his lifestyle, made Whitman especially sensitive to the plight of African Americans as they migrated north. Whitman’s early poetry celebrates America and the common man, especially the blue collar workers, using the rhythm and language of everyday speech. According to writer Ralph Ellison, Whitman found in the dialect of the freed slaves, the possibility of a “grand American opera” (Wilson). His empathy also extended to Jewish migrants who, Ellison writes, took Whitman seriously, calling him the “great gray father,” and believing he was “a comrade whose embrace included them” (Bachman). Listen as Whitman welcomes these migrants, celebrating their “limitless” potential and divine right to a spot in America in his poem, “You, Whoever You Are.”

Bachman, Merle L. *Recovering “Yiddishland.”* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 130.

Wilson, Ivy G. “Postwar America, Again.” In Ivy G Wilson, ed., *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 104-123.