Walt Whitman's Attraction to Indian Place Names

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In an essay on the nature of American English, published in 1885 in the North American Review, Walt Whitman made an outstanding statement about Indian place names. As he wrote:

Some of the names ... are of an appropriateness and originality unsurpassable. This applies to the Indian words, which are often perfect. Oklahoma is proposed in Congress for the name of one of our new Territories.

This high opinion of Indian names is reflected throughout Leaves of Grass. On page after page the nests of such names demonstrate Whitman's relish for them.

His most memorable tribute to such names occurs in the autobiographical poem of 1860, "Starting from Paumanok." This is the passage:

And for the Past, I pronounce what the air holds of the red aborigines.
The red aborigines!

Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds,
calls as of birds and animals in the woods, syllabled to us for names:

Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kaquata, Oronoco, Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla;

Leaving such to The States, they melt, they depart, charging the water and the land with names.

You will note that he attributes a mystical origin to them. They are "syllabled to us," he says, from "sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals in the woods."

Two Indian names in particular deserve special treatment, because of Whitman's extensive use of them -- they are Paumanok and Manhattan. Whitman was born and grew up at the western end of Long Island, but that name never appears in Leaves of Grass -- it is always Paumanok. This was originally the name of the easternmost end of the island, governed by the sachems of Montauk and Shelter Island, and is first recorded in a deed of May 3, 1639. There are two rival etymologies, one, "land where there is traveling by water," and second, "land of tribute," for the Indians there had to pay tribute to
the Pequots on the mainland.

In many poems, Whitman used Paumanok when looking back at his youth. From "American Feuillage" of 1860:

Me pleas'd, rambling in lanes and country fields,
Paumanok's fields, ...

on the sands, on some shallow bay of Paumanok, I.

Or this, from the poem "Elemental Drifts":

I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you,
Paumanok,
Where they rustle up, hoarse and sibilant. ...
Paumanok, there and then, ...
These you presented to me, you fish-shaped island,
As I wended the shores I know.
... I too Paumanok,
I too have bubbled up.

In his "Poem of Joys" he recalled -- "Another time, trailing for blue-fish off Paumanok, I stand with braced body." The most evocative use occurs in the poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where he says:

Blow up, sea-winds, along Paumanok's shore!
I wait and I wait, till you blow my mate to me. ...
With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,
On the sands of Paumanok's shore, gray and rustling.
And then later: "... the sea ... sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach."

Since Whitman's time, the name has appeared very little; but at the present day, among the groups opposing the establishment of nuclear reactors on Long Island, is one called "Paumanok People's Organization." This of course is an echo of Whitman.

It was easy for Whitman to take the ferry from Brooklyn across to Manhattan, and he early fell in love with the bustling city. The very name Manhattan appealed to him, for he used it to the exclusion of any other. Its earliest known appearance is from 1607, on a map in the Spanish archives, and many etymologies have been offered. The most plausible seems to be "hill island."

Whitman used the name as dithyrambic apostrophes in many of his poems. Thus, from "A Broadway Pageant" of 1865:

... million-footed Manhattan, unpent, descends to her pavements; ...

Superb-faced Manhattan!
Comrade Americanos!

Or from another poem in the same year:

... give me the streets of Manhattan! ...
Manhattan streets, with their powerful throbs, ...
Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus -- ... 
Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.

In his "City of Orgies" occurs this line: "As I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love, ... -- these repay me." Again in "Song of the Banner at Day-Break," he declaimed:

Speak to the child, O bard, out of Manhattan; ... Speak to our children all, or north or south of Manhattan, ...
Where our hoarse Niagara rumbles, where our prairie-plows are plowing.

But the form that he loved most of all was the expanded poetic one, Mannahatta. There had been many variant spellings, but this was the one adopted by Washington Irving in his *Knickerbocker's History of New York* in 1809. Whitman's poem entitled "Mannahatta" tells of his love for the name:

I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon, lo! upsprang the aboriginal name!
Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, unruly, musical, self-sufficient:
I see that the word of my city is that word up there, 
Because I see that word nestled in nests of water-bays, superb, with tall and wonderful spires, 
... Numberless crowded streets ... [and so on through many facets of the city].

The name occurs many times in his "American Feuillage," as if he were caressing the word:

Through Mannahatta's streets I walking, ...
-- Northward, young men of Mannahatta -- the target company from an excursion returning home at evening. ...

In the Mannahatta, streets, piers, shipping, ...
And I too of the Mannahatta, singing thereof -- and no less in myself than the whole of the Mannahatta itself.

A similar spirit is shown in the poem "Drum-Taps" of 1865:

Mannahatta a-march! -- and it's 0 to sing it well! ...

And you, Lady of Ships, you Mannahatta! ...
... now you smile with joy, exulting old Mannahatta!

Years later Whitman composed a prose paragraph
telling of his infatuation with the name. He contributed the following to the New York Tribune of May 10, 1879:

More and more, too, the old name absorbs into me -- MANNAHATTA, "the place encircled by many swift tides and sparkling waters." How fit a name for America's great democratic island city! The word itself, how beautiful! how aboriginal! how it seems to rise with tall spires, glistening in sunshine, with such New World atmosphere, vista and action!

So far, it might appear that Whitman was parochial, with his Paumanok, his Montauk, his Gowanus, his Mannahatta; but in fact his sympathies were spread wide, and Indian names from the whole continent were incorporated. Names of Indian names occur as in the following:

From Paumanok starting, I fly like a bird, ...

to Michigan then,

To Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, to sing their songs (they are inimitable;)

Then to Ohio and Indiana to sing theirs -- to Missouri and Kansas and Arkansas and Kentucky ...

To Texas, ... to roam accepted everywhere.

In a more dithyrambic vein:
0 the lands! interlink'd ...
Land of the eastern Chesapeake! Land of the Delaware!
Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan!
Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land!
Land of ... Connecticut!

Or from his poem "Thoughts," of 1860:

Of these years I sing, ...
Of what Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and the rest, are to be,
Of what a few years will show there in Nebraska...
(Or afar ... to Sitka or Alaska) ...
Of all sloping down there where the fresh free giver, the mother, the Mississippi flows.

The westward expansion of the country was a recurrent theme with Whitman, and his treatment permitted him to dwell lovingly on the Indian names. In his early poem "Salut au Monde!" he asked:

What do you hear, Walt Whitman? ...

I hear quick rifle-cracks from the riflemen of East Tennessee and Kentucky, hunting on hills ...

His chanting involved other names, as in this, of 1860:
Chants of the prairies;
Chants of the long-running Mississippi: and down
to the Mexican sea;
Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin
and Minnesota;
Chants going forth from the centre, from Kansas,
and thence ... to vivify all.
His tribute to the pioneers involved the Middle Western
states, as in this:

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri,
with the continental blood inter'vain'd ...

Pioneers! O pioneers!

His "A Carol of Harvest, for 1867" brought in other
Indian names:

Harvest the wheat of Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin --
every barbed spear ...;
Harvest the maize of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee
-- each ear in its light-green sheath,
Gather ... the buckwheat of Michigan ...;
Gather the cotton in Mississippi or Alabama.

The burgeoning city of Chicago attracted Whitman's
attention. Speaking of ideal people, he said in 1860:
" ... they shall enjoy the sight of the beef, lumber,
breadstuffs, of Chicago, the great city." Here is a faint foreshadowing of Carl Sandburg's most famous poem. Again, in his "Song at Sunset":

As I roam'd the streets of inland Chicago ... I have charged myself with contentment and triumph.

Or this passage:

Lo! from deeps more unfathomable, ...
Manhattan, rising, ... Chicago, unchain'd.
The Indian names in the Far West attracted him, too. In one passage he wrote: "A promise to ... Oregon: soon I travel toward you, to remain, to teach robust American love." Or in a later poem, "Passage to India":

I see ... the Wahsatch mountains; ... I see the clear waters of Lake Tahoe -- ...

Under the influence of his friend John Burroughs, he wrote "Song of the Redwood-Tree" in 1874, with references to --

... these mountain peaks -- Shasta ...
... these valleys grand -- Yosemite.
... to the Washatch -- or Idaho far, or Utah.

One of his poems, "Longings for Home," draws extensively on the Indian names of the South. Its burden is as follows:
O magnet-South! O glistening, perfumed South!

My South! ... 

Dear to me the Roanoke, the Savannah, the Altamaha, the Pedee, the Tombigbee, the Santee, the Coosa ... 

I float on the Okeechobee — ... 

I pass rude sea-headlands and enter Pamlico Sound through an inlet. 

... A Tennessee corn-field — ... 

An Arkansas prairie — ... 

O longings irrepressible! O I will go back to old Tennessee, and never wander more! 

The sentiment here seems somewhat far-fetched and manufactured, inasmuch as Whitman spent only a few months in the South, editing a newspaper in New Orleans. Floyd Stovall, although an appreciative critic, called the poem "faintly factitious." The explanation may well be that the Indian names of the region so beguiled him that he went beyond his authentic experience. Such is the lure of place names. 

More in character, since Whitman was strongly anti-slavery in outlook, was his description in 1855 of the hunts for runaway slaves — 

... through the regions drain'd by the Tennessee,
or through those of the Arkansaw:

Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahoochee or Altamahaw.

Even in his distaste for the slave-hunts, he cannot resist Muskogean names like Chattahoochee and Altamahaw.

Let us turn for a moment to a more general question. How does Whitman's attitude toward the Indian fit into the American cultural pattern? It is well known that Americans have been ambivalent in this matter. A certain strain of thinking honored the "noble savage," and yet in other quarters, as in Texas, the avowed aim was "to exterminate the savages." In his essay "Reactions to Indian Place Names," Charles Hockett of Cornell University describes this dichotomy as follows:

... two different attitudes toward the Indian: he is a poor blundering moron, talking most clearly when he talks his broken English; or he is a stalwart primitive full of poetry. The two attitudes are not contradictory: one stems from ignorance and contempt, the other from ignorance and romanticism; and contempt and romanticism go hand in hand if there is enough ignorance to hold them together.
Whitman, with his respect for the integrity of all human beings, did not fall in with any of these stereotypes. He had first-hand experience with many groups of Indians during his stint as a clerk in the Indian Bureau in Washington in 1865, and about twenty years later he wrote up his impressions. He set forth as "one very definite conviction" the following:

There is something about these aboriginal Americans, in their highest characteristic representations, essential traits, and the ensemble of their physique and physiognomy -- something very remote, very lofty, arousing comparisons with our own civilized ideals -- something that our literature, portrait painting, etc., have never caught, and that will almost certainly never be transmitted to the future, even as a reminiscence.

In Leaves of Grass itself are a few indications. In his "Song of Myself" of 1855 he asks:

The friendly and flowing savage, Who is he?

... Is he from the Mississippi country? Iowa, Oregon?

Then in "Salut au Monde" he notes: "I see the despondent red man in the west lingering about the banks of Moingo." And in a long inventory of the peoples of the
world he makes reference to -- "You low expiring aborigines of the hills of Utah, Oregon, Californial."

Let me close by quoting for you a poem that highlights Whitman's use of Indian names. This is from his "American feuillage" of 1860:

America always!...

Sunlight by day on the valley of the Susquehanna, and on the valleys of the Potomac and Rappahannock, and the valleys of the Roanoke and Delaware;

In their northerly wilds, beasts of prey haunting the Adirondacks, the hills -- or lapping the Saginaw waters to drink; ... 

Rude boats descending the big Pedee. ... 

-- In Tennessee and Kentucky, slaves busy in the coalings, ...

Down in Texas, the cotton-field, the negro-cabins, ... Otherways, there, atwixt the banks of the Arkansaw, ... the Tombigbee, ... the Saskatchewawan, or the Osage, I with the spring waters laughing and skipping.

Here Whitman uses the enumerative or cataloguing technique for which he is famous. The piling up of Indian names in numerous passages such as these is evidence
of his overwhelming attraction to them.

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NOTES


2 Collected Writings, Leaves of Grass (New York, 1965), I, 26. Later quotations from Whitman's poetry are to be found in this volume, under the poem cited.

3 William Wallace Tooker, The Indian Place-Names on Long Island and Islands Adjacent (New York, 1911), pp. 182-83.


5 Tooker, op. cit., p. 96; see also George R. Stewart, American Place-Names (New York, 1970), p. 277.

6 Collected Writings, Prose Works, II, 683.

7 Collected Writings, I, 473.

8 Charles F. Hockett, "Reactions to Indian Place Names," in American Speech, XXV (May, 1950), 118-21; quot., p. 120.