The (Queer) Wound Dresser:
Expanding Walt Whitman's Place in Nursing History

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If asked to identify an example of a well-known LGBTQ+ person in the nursing profession's history, very few people would immediately have a name in mind. Lacking specific physical or apparent characteristics across time, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer individuals are easily passed over in historical analysis. These individuals, often grouped under the umbrella term "queer" (depending on who you ask), have not looked the same throughout history – and they still do not. This fact has interacted with ever-changing social constructions of gender and sexuality to create a historical veil of heteronormativity that obscures those individuals we might conceive of as queer in modern terms. Is it any surprise, then, that such a gendered profession as nursing would be no exception? If queer individuals are people who fall outside of norms surrounding sex and gender, one could guess that these people would find nursing's rigid and gendered history unforgiving. However, to assume that such queer nurses did not exist reflects a failure to understand that history has a tendency to gloss over difference. A quick reach into America's history reveals that the answers may be under our noses if we take the time to revisit them. In this case, one can look to Walt Whitman. An incredibly well-known American poet, his writing also often identifies him as a prominent queer individual in the country's history—but he was also a volunteer nurse. Though Walt Whitman's image as an iconic, queer American poet is well-known, his time as a nurse in the Civil War is far less prominent. Further, he is rarely if ever recognized specifically as a queer nurse. Identifying and

analyzing Whitman's particular intersection between identity and profession may serve to confound potent and gendered images of nursing.

Walt Whitman's life is the story of a radical thinker and influential writer in America's history. Most famous for his book of poems titled *Leaves of Grass,* his free-verse writing in the 1850s sang of the still-new nation and his democratic vision for a unified country in all of its diversity (Folsom & Price, n.d.). Though he'd continue to edit and re-release this book for the rest of his life, the tone he set in *Leaves of Grass* is part of the impact that has made him so influential. His romance with democracy and ideas of equality that may have been radical at the time created waves that reverberate today. In "Walt Whitman's Different Lights," Robert Martin (1994) presents some of Whitman's writing as "a confrontation of the reader with the reality and diversity of experience" (p. 48). By reminding readers of the diverse nature of their new immigrant nation, he clings to the core ideals of democracy—even though a modern lens may deeply incriminate such romantic claims about the early United States. Yet, this does not diminish the power of his words, especially in the divided and tumultuous times of the Civil War.

That same Civil War tension set the stage for more radical work. He had a public platform with *Leaves of Grass,* and he went forth to capitalize on it. His writings made deep connections between democracy and sexuality, in many instances by writing very homoerotic poems that capitalized on a violently masculine war which simultaneously "exposed men's physical and emotional vulnerability" (Bronksi, 2011, p. 65). By pushing boundaries of the way men may show affection to one another, Whitman used his platform to add his own addendum to the idea of democracy—sexual freedom. Political and violent tensions became an opportunity for him to emphasize love of all kinds in his calls for unity. This also applied to his radical ideas of

the human body and its importance more broadly (Martin, 1994, p. 47). These are the sort of ideas that modern queer movements might be constructed around to this day. Whitman can be seen in many ways as a pioneer for queer people in America. As suggested previously, the "queer" umbrella does not exclude Whitman himself. Although "homosexual" was not a well-established word at the time to describe it, many of his letters suggest a series of sexual relationships with men (Bronski, 2011, p. 65). A lot of these facts, though, are fairly well-known about Whitman. Perhaps his status as a white male has afforded him visibility throughout history, and many historians like Michael Bronski emphasize his seemingly unavoidable queerness. However, there are parts of his story that are less often told. His intimate relationships with the Civil War, the ideas it helped him create, and the men that fought in it were no coincidence. His radical writing was deeply influenced by all of his experiences, and as a surprise to many, Walt Whitman was a volunteer nurse during the war.

It started in 1862. A newspaper list of the wounded made him concerned that his brother was amongst them, and upon finding his brother healthy realized just how terrible the military hospital conditions were (Folsom & Price, n.d.). This empowered his decision to volunteer. When he got there, the little things made all the difference. Whitman estimated that he saw beyond 80,000 patients in his time as a hospital visitor, doing anything from writing letters for the wounded to bringing them candy and fruit (Keeling, Hehman, & Kirchgessner, 2018, p. 34). These things likely meant a lot to patients as they are characteristic of traditional, holistic nursing care. However, his involvement in care seems to have gone even further. In his 1865 poem "The Wound Dresser," Whitman alludes to clinical nursing care when he says "I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound, / Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene

…While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail." Further lines describe other wounds he had addressed including fractured thighs and knees. It would appear that Whitman even fits more modern descriptions of the nursing role. It is also very clear that he thought highly of this nursing role. He said himself in an 1863 New York Times article that "a benevolent person, with the right qualities and tact, cannot, perhaps, make a better investment of himself, at present, anywhere upon the varied surface of the whole of this big world, than in these military hospitals among such thousands of most interesting young men" (Whitman, 1898, p. 8). Nursing was not just a small part of his life that he spent a little time on—he dedicated years to it. With such extensive sacrifice and contribution, it is refreshing to see his name make it into in current nursing history books. However, if this gem is no secret to nursing history, and is in fact additionally referenced by queer history work, it becomes more curious that no additional significance has been attached to this intersection of identity.

Though this has not been a defining or well-known story about him, he is named at least briefly for his nursing contributions across many sources. Thus, it may be hyperbolic to say that Whitman's time as a nurse has been fully obscured by history. It could be said, though, that there are missing pieces. To approach it more critically, a discussion of queer visibility in nursing may be appropriate. Whitman's maleness, whiteness, and even queerness are made visible because they are the crux of his impact in American history as a whole. The former characteristics make his voice socially "trustworthy" in the larger context of early American society, and the latter is what makes his poetry stand out as particularly unique. Martin's (1994) discussion of Whitman's radicalism notes that "Whitman's influence has been enormous, and has always included a recognition of his part in the redefinition of sexual desire" (p. 47). All of this makes it even more

surprising that nursing history references to Whitman (albeit few and brief to begin with) do not appear to make any reference to the fact of his queerness. Though at first it seems coincidental, it seems far less so when evaluating the dearth of literature on queer nursing history. As a result, we continue to be left wondering: Where are the queer nurses? Whitman may be only somewhat of a "hidden figure" in nursing, but it may be that his occasional presence in those narratives is made more palatable by the omission of his experience as a sexual minority in America. For him to be such a queer icon until discussed as a nurse is confusing. To fully understand this, there must be an analysis of where his queerness intersects with his time in the war.

As mentioned before, Whitman's experience as a civil war nurse affected his sexually radical work—perhaps, in parallel, his queer experience and work impacted his experience as a nurse. To value all of the aforementioned work and influence of Whitman, his reality cannot be compartmentalized. All of these truths were part of the same human life. If we separate them out, our analysis does not tell the full story. To bring those truths to light and to hold them equally high, we must recognize what about the nursing profession and its history might conceal those realities to begin with. The development of nursing as a profession surely focuses on the female experience. Specifically, its image is constructed as "a seemingly natural blending of a refined morality, female compassion, and professional skill" (Boschma, 2003, p. 81). Queerness, if it is assumed to include people of non-normative sexualities and gender expression, lies in direct contrast to that. This is especially potent if a sexual person is presumed to be an immoral one as well. Further, LGBTQ+ people not only fall outside of gender binaries—their fluid and, well, "queer" existence may even make clear the constructed nature of these boundaries. As a result, their very existence within a gendered profession such as nursing could not only be seen as

incongruent but as detrimental to the systemic effort put into nursing's feminization. It thus becomes systemically productive to conceal experiences like Whitman's within the nursing profession. In "The Wound-Dresser," he writes of the way he felt about his patients: "One turns to me his appealing eyes – poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you" (Whitman, 1865). A discerning eye makes clear that what one might pass off as "gay" or over-emotional in modern constructions of masculinity was truly Whitman's challenge that men, too, were affectionate beings. Men had compassion. Men could feel and care deeply for someone, nevermind the alleged special quality of the aforementioned "female compassion." Here we also see a written intersection of his nursing role and his queerness. Whitman, simply by nature of existing as a queer nurse, reminds us of a reality far more complex than the dichotomies imposed upon the act of nursing and of caring. Opening this plot hole in nursing's gender boundaries creates the theoretical possibility of many more queer nurses—and a more nuanced place for male nurses. Naming him this way reminds us to be more critical in our reflection on nursing history and the heroes it holds so dearly (or forgets to mention), but it also requires a reflection on all the work Whitman has done and how it all connects. His queerness was relevant to his poetry, his poetry was relevant to his nursing, and thus, his nursing was relevant to his queerness.

It would be rash to imply that he was entirely unproblematic in his time. Rather, it is important to see that reclaiming Whitman's queerness in nursing specifically is productive in that it allows for a new way to view the history of masculinity, LGBTQ+ issues, and gender more broadly in nursing. The very recognition that queer people exist in nursing is a valuable tool in challenging modern issues of gender in the profession. It is apt to remember something he

famously wrote in “Song of Myself”: “I am large, I contain multitudes” (Whitman, 1892). His story is diverse and he is made of the many aspects of his experience – just as there is far more to every other nurse in history than what is told of them. Every nurse contains multitudes, as does the nursing profession itself. Identifying Whitman as a queer nurse is one example of many, many nurses whose stories are yet to be told fully. As a whole, nurses are more diverse than any singular narrative can encapsulate—7but it may be surprising how much there is to gain from telling those individual, complex stories one by one.

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