

Mememes of Grass

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*“Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.”*

- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

Proprioception is how we intuit our body’s position in space—the situated placement of our limbs, a chill mapping the edge of our skin and slight drift of air moving tiny delicate hairs, triangulated with muscle movements, tendon pulls, and the tickle of nerve endings. Finely attuned proprioception helps gymnasts tiptoe the line between grace and catastrophe. It’s an aggregate “sense,” cobbled together from bits of somatic association, allowing us to move with a confident cognitive model of our orientation within the broader world.



Figure 1. Meme: [“Is This a Pigeon?”](#) Composition Credit: Emma Jarvis.

I sometimes think of what I do as helping students develop a form of “historical proprioception,” a way of mapping their own cognitive instincts in historical space and becoming attuned to their own sensibilities as not unrelated to those of the past. Yes, I’m stretching, bending, perhaps contorting a strict medical notion of this concept as I suppose a literary scholar would—operating, alternatively, as the gymnasts and “Butterfly Guys” of the humanities. Still, we don’t just read, but attempt to understand “reading” as something that has always unfolded in space, among bodies like ours: positioned, cramped, and surrounded by particular other things vying for our attention and investment. Historical proprioception is an awareness not of what a piece of media seems to emanate on its own, but of all of the various sensations and sidelongings that might have situated its effect on the person interacting with it. How would it have felt to exist within this past moment, not as if within a “historical narrative,” but as a body in a specific present-tense space overflowing with the push and pull of associations and interruptions, sense and apparent nonsense? Developing this “feel” invites a set of challenging asymmetries into our engagement with the page—failures of fit that are at the heart of reading “critically,” rather than in a comfortable habit of assumption with regard to the past.



Figure 2. Meme: [“This Edible...”](#) - Composition Credit: Omo Bailey

This is heady stuff, I realize, in a piece meandering toward a discussion of how I used memes to teach “Song of Myself.” But memes meander like Walt Whitman’s “me.” Their power is in suggested fields of meaning that align in hilarious and heady ways. And fixations on the reading body in a suggestive association-space are central to getting at Whitman as a vehicle of his moment, as a genre-stretching reporter on the beat of life in the urbanizing mass culture of the antebellum United States. Whitman’s New York was awash in the superfluous and the sidelong. To sit and read on the Brooklyn side of the East River in the summer of 1856 was to face Manhattan as an island (no bridge yet), a waypoint surrounded by boats, steam, and masts, a glistening sheen of water receding to New Jersey in the background, with the sounds and solidity of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle warehouse behind you. Distance, industry, and the gliding movements of seagulls might come to mind. But take one of those same chugging ferries across the river in late fall and you could find yourself in a different world of buzzy resonances at the intersection of Broadway and Ann, with the ridiculous “musical” cacophonies of Barnum’s American Museum across the way, warm crowds of wandering people, colorful advertisements, the shiver and flush of nearby tenements and taverns, and wide plaza enclosures textured with wood, brick, and paper bulging to pulp in the gray November drizzle. What would it mean to read the same words in these different spaces—to feel them as prompts to alternative fixations? As Whitman notes in *A Backward Glance*, “It makes such difference where you read.” That “where” changes what a reader might attach to and apprehend as they assay varying points of reference on a page—what can be “funny” and what’s taken as serious.

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I have students read about these contexts to invite a more bodily understanding of the world Whitman and so many others were writing in and to. We consider work on social performance, material culture, media engagement, and urban space by [Uri McMillan](#), [Elizabeth Maddock Dillon](#), [Robin Bernstein](#), [David](#)

[Henkin](#), [Jack Tchen](#), [Carla L. Peterson](#), and [Katherine C. Grier](#)—anchoring reception role-play to documentary authority. But a “feel for” must emerge as a set of habits, and habits require practical exercise. Beyond explaining Whitman’s text as dwelling in a world of wondrous juxtapositions, I cultivate an instinct for how juxtaposition makes a piece read differently, opening up fragmentary views and ironies that have a direction and momentum even if they haven’t elevated to “sense.” We remain in the place where this “sense” is always something to be made and practiced, rather than discovered or revealed.

The exercise that produced the memes interlaced here was part of a sustained simmer in “Vision and Textuality,” a course whose syllabus lingers in the nineteenth century but arcs persistently between then and now. Students began by collecting a picture each day on Tumblr blogs, devoid of text or captioning. The [prompt for this assignment](#) obliquely signaled meme culture by using the Butterfly Guy image as a visual joke interrupting the standard procedural text. At the end of the collection phase, students had a series of evocative pictorial fragments—“leaves,” perhaps—of their shared world that were also attached to a sense of self-representation. These were addressed as small unified archives: a classmate [developed descriptive text, tags, and titling information](#), and the content creators were obliged to add this “metadata” to their collection. The creators then wrote essays discussing how these labels, titles, and summaries changed the effective meaning of their pictures, restaging them in sometimes exciting and sometimes minimizing and frustrating ways.

This assignment flow was designed to link theories of “ekphrasis” to practical knowledge in media curation and metadata. After practicing the typical directionality of criticism—interpretative text as an “alongside” that orients a creative work—the next step was to think in the opposite direction: to consider the power of other sensations and modes of media to inflect textual meaning. And there was special opportunity to imagine Whitman’s world and words through the saturation of playful pictorial cultures in our own.

Whitman’s poem already has an algorithmic quality that inevitably emerges in teaching it. I’ve written about this [elsewhere](#), but briefly: The effusiveness of “Song of Myself” forces readers to make choices among its distinctly encapsulated lines. Chunks of the poem stand alone in ways that visually flag them as open for a modular kind of constructive attention: grab a piece here, a piece there, and each person builds their own collection or pathway through the overgrowth of “or”s and repetitive line openings. There is less of the narrative and more of

the psalm to these segments as Whitman takes advantage of the flipability of the codex form to encourage “dipping in” and “skipping around” (what computer science would later seize as the advantage of “random access memory”).

I place this operative discussion next to the 1855 Leaves of Grass frontispiece—which pairs a tiny, distant-seeming picture of Whitman with comparatively huge titling that evokes urban signage—to think of the poem as a mediator or shared resource, a form that vicariously links writer and reader. We read our own significance into the lines (we might say we wear the lines in our own way) and others do the same. When our readings differ, the poem becomes a place where these differences must be seen as coincident with each other, pointed out, accounted for, and layered into the picture. If I am both me and something different than me (the provocation of seeing someone else in the costume that defines me), then I am prompted to ask questions about parts of me that I otherwise wouldn’t recognize as my own. This mirrors metaphor’s foundational work as a means of transport and reconsideration between two different ideas strategically taken as one.



Figure 3. Meme: [“Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man”](#)
Composition Credit: Kyra Sobiegraj

The [assignment](#) itself, situated amid these Whitman sessions, is straightforward enough: find a meme you like, research and discuss its form, use it to restage a line from Whitman’s poem, and post the result on your blog. The poem and the meme become costumes reciprocally worn: the 1855 lines “act” like a contemporary joke, and the contemporary image “acts” like an antebellum poem, both pointing at each other, both struggling to claim the “real” meaning while ensuring that it gets thoroughly mixed up in the process. Feeling the torque between the two requires readers to assess the potential tonal variations in Whitman’s lines. Or at least, this was the idea. Once the experiment was underway, I came to realize that there was an unintended consequence of joyfulness and attachment in the students’ work that magnified its impact.



Figure 4. Meme: [“Evil Kermit”](#) - Composition Credit: Brianna Bruno

Creating a joke from something one already finds funny feels easy enough, but it provides a surprisingly rich opportunity to reflect on feelings of ease, humor, and “merely” associative dimensions of meaning—all things undergraduates sometimes rule out by presupposing that they aren’t appropriate sites of significance. In researching their meme and analyzing its humor, the composite creator performs interpretative intervention as the layering of a magnetic force: this is not the explaining context, but a mode of exploring potential contexts. Moreover, this offers a moment to address unwelcome inflections in the meme’s reception history

and to consider what it means to “reclaim” something whose meaning has been yanked around by various communities of taste. On the level of textual analysis, successfully segmenting and selecting from “Song of Myself” attests to students’ grasp of the relevant pieces involved. (And if that grasp is lacking, the breakdown is clarified in ways that an essay’s complexity might obscure.)

These memes let the students demonstrate their holistic sense of the poem—what they imagine will work with the comedic picture and what won’t. The result is a series of moves that require investment, reflecting sophisticated levels of attunement to a textual dataset. Since memes are often conversational in nature, the assignment also allows students to imagine the poem in conversation with itself across a vast terrain, eliding many other lines of text in between (as in the “Evil Kermit” example above). Is this leap hilarious? If internet virality is the metric, then, [I guess, empirically, yes](#)? But the joke only lands by using hilarity to address a series of important questions—about the interactions of media, about the building of common “senses” of humor among communities both abstract and embodied, and about how these feelings are not unique to our own moment, but historical sites of interest as well.

What I love most about this assignment is that it leverages the literacies that students are already developing in the mixed-media environments that dominate their own reading lives—a proprioceptive instinct for their position in contemporary culture. Rather than holding literature as an elite form distinct from the tendencies and traditions of other media, it asks how media forms co-operate in a messy world of inflection, repurposing, and persistent reconsideration. It lets reader-analysts situate the poem in their own media space, while thinking about the distances and proximities of that contact in productive ways. What would it mean to imagine that Whitman is “joking” when he asks us to consider grass as the “beautiful uncut hair of graves?” Is he being ignorant? Profound? Both and neither, depending on the angle. Each sense flutters like a living butterfly: delicate, tenuous, alighting here and there, with a question, not an answer, spanning the distance between us and it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug Guerra is assistant professor of English at SUNY Oswego, where he teaches courses in American literature, media theory, popular culture (especially games from the mid-nineteenth century through the twenty-first), and the relationships between technological innovation, aesthetic form, and social arrangement. Dr. Guerra's book, *Slantwise Moves: Games, Literature, and Social Invention in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (UPenn Press 2018), analyzes nineteenth-century games as materialized theories of action, using them to understand invisibilized and ephemeral pleasures that both structured and troubled what it meant to associate in the broader civic sphere. Dr. Guerra's work has appeared in *American Literature* and *ESQ* and has been supported by fellowships from the Brian Sutton-Smith Archives of Play at the Strong Museum, the American Antiquarian Society, Penn State's "First Book Institute," and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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