

## Flowers

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# Flowers

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*Kirsten Twelbeck*

## Mute Eloquence

In the early nineteenth century, an author who simply identifies herself as “a Lady” instructs American readers how to “make the most” of those short-lived, withering “objects which surround us”—the queendom of flowers. First published in 1829, *Flora’s Dictionary* becomes a phenomenal success. It is printed several times, culminating in the lavishly illustrated 1855 edition, a beautiful gift book featuring mixed bouquets with flowers of all colors and shapes. In the accompanying explanations, readers learn that yellow acacias convey a concealed love, that jasmine breathes elegance, and that zinnias announce absence. They are also informed that the author’s name is Elizabeth Washington Gamble Wirt. As she proudly claims in the preface, she has written the book for the sole purpose of entertaining her family (she is a mother of ten). Yet for the nineteenth-century “true woman,” entertainment is also thoroughly educational: listing more than 200 flowers, *Flora’s Dictionary* acknowledges the value of botanical categorization while sharing the common admiration of a blooming earth. The actual impetus for the book, however, is a patriotic, transcendentalist longing for “something sacred” to take root in American conversations (Gamble 16). Arranged in the strict alphabetical order of an encyclopedia, *Flora’s Dictionary* draws on Middle Eastern and Asian symbolism, scours through British poetry, fantasizes about the popular names of flowers and their botanical definitions, alludes to their scent, look, and medical virtue—all to build associations that aim at replacing “those awkward and delicate *declarations*” of American men with something reminiscent of the “mute eloquence of the eastern lover” (Gamble 16).

## Unfolding

Of course, the language of flowers is not for everyone. In the nineteenth century, few whites believed that a black person, a slave even, could own the capacity “to stamp intelligence and expression on a simple posy” (Gamble 17). It must have been a provocation, or, for some, a moment of triumph, to observe that “the whole front” of Uncle Tom’s legendary cabin “was covered by a large, scarlet bignonia and a native multiflora rose, which, entwisting and interlacing, left scarce a vestige of the rough logs to be seen” (Stowe 20). Danger and beauty reside side by side on the plantation, and it is the slave woman’s garden that cautions us against the sentimentality of the scene: the “various brilliant annuals, such as marigolds, petunias, four-o’clocks” exude a negative mix of trouble (marigolds), anger (petunias), and timidity (four-o’clocks). What drives Aunt Chloe, the gardener of this “neat garden-patch”? Is the “cook,” which she “certainly was, in the very bone and center of her soul,” also a healer who works with the magical power of flowers that she knows will “unfold their splendors” (Stowe 20)? In the mid-nineteenth century, homeopathy was more popular in the United States than in Europe, and, like many of their time, the Beecher family relies on homeopaths, hydropaths, and other alternative doctors. Is Aunt Chloe’s gardening scheme based on the “like cures like” (*similia similibus curentur*) principle? Or is her flower bed a far cry from a medieval belief in magical spells, but a protective ring to fend off the collective fears of the slave community? Or is it simply a sign for the white reader, a hint at the dark things to come? Whatever the motivation: Chloe appropriates and continues the latest fad that was also further popularizing *Flora’s Dictionary*: some editions included blank pages in several colors, inviting readers to contribute their own pressed specimens. Chloe’s marigolds, however, are alive, nodding their heads—a black woman’s thoughts planted on a white man’s property. Chloe seems to know the strengths and limits of her art when she exclaims that “Mas’r George is such a beautiful reader” (27). In the lives of slaves, listening can bring relief. Yet ultimately, literacy is a matter of survival, not beauty.

## Ceremonies

Shortly after Harriet Beecher Stowe had, according to rumor, caused the American Civil War, Dorothea Dix was appointed the Union’s Superintendent of Army Nurses. At the time she was known as a tireless crusader for improving the lives of the mentally ill but also as a writer of didactic fiction. Only once did she break out of the moral norms that governed her stories: in 1829 she followed the same popular fad as *Flora’s Dictionary* and published *A Garland of Flora*. The book was not only a commercial failure but led Dix to abruptly

end her career as a writer. In the self-denigrating manner that was so typical for her gender, she admits that *A Garland of Flora* is an embarrassing example of a woman's "scribbling" and an instance of those "degenerate days" that her gender spends in the limelight of the public sphere. More than thirty years later, Dix resolves what had been her personal conflict by combining the idea of respectable womanhood with the concept of female usefulness. While she helped the profession of nursing become a widely accepted female occupation, she set standards that prevented young, good looking, and ambitious women from helping with the wounded. Esther Hill Hawks, for instance, fell victim to those standards. She was one of only a few American women with excellent credentials, including a medical degree. But she was under 30 years old, not a mother, and certainly not "plain looking" enough to become a nurse (a position she had applied for after being turned down as a doctor). Having exhausted all other possibilities to significantly contribute to the Union's cause, she eventually joined an early post-slavery experiment and traveled to the South Carolina Sea Islands—a region that had already been liberated in 1861. Yet instead of working as a missionary (as many others did), she became a doctor in the black hospital of Beaufort. It was here that she learned that many contraband women were raped by Union soldiers stationed there and/or forced into relationships with the officers. And she also came to understand that the few white women residing on these islands were not safe from the "brutal lusts of the soldiers" (Hawks 34). Hawks's diary bears witness to a situation that is rarely talked about. But it also conveys a white woman's alienation from her own culture. After being forced to leave her work as a doctor in the Beaufort hospital, her entries betray an identification with the black community that goes far beyond the widespread appropriation of slavery in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century feminism. Shunned by whites who refused to acknowledge her as a professional doctor, she sought—and found—recognition elsewhere, among the Gullah population. In her diary, the white doctor and teacher is showered with flowers, fruit, and songs that become ideal carriers of provocative, interracial, and feminist messages. The events described appear archaic: the flowers remain unspecified, whether they come singly or in a bouquet is not mentioned. Rather than expressing the dreams and fears of America's emerging white middle class, they serve as ceremonial offerings that distinguish the African American givers as members of a different culture with a more pleasant model of social interaction:

Two of my girls (in my first class) Salina and Rose, came to see [sic] last night and brought, one a can of peaches, and the other a half doz [sic] eggs—they had just bought them out of their own money and of their own accord—dear girls—it is pleasant to be remembered so kindly. Some of them are constantly bringing me something—which they think I shall relish—and the little children are constantly running in with flowers! (118)

By accepting flowers, fruit, and eggs in exchange for her teaching and support, Hawks replaces Dix's nineteenth-century ethics of female modesty and sacrifice with an earlier and ultimately joyful economy of exchange and mutual recognition that is quite remarkable for her time.

The transitory character of these gifts is significant: Hawks's fantasies of leadership include the promise of a fabulous ceremony in which signs of interracial respect are perpetually renewed. The seemingly endless stream of flowers and songs signals a "democracy in action"—a social contract based on mutual recognition and constant reassurance that firmly acknowledges the many individual stories of rape, exploitation, and cross-racial courage.

## Spring

Bearing large clusters of fragrant purple or white that fade as quickly as they have appeared, lilacs are among the most opulent and ephemeral of flowers. According to *Flora's Dictionary*, lilacs stand for the pure and undefined—a sign of youth and of "the first emotions of love" (134). In his famous elegy for Lincoln, Walt Whitman mourns not only his personal loss of the late President ("him I love") but the nation's bereavement of its "Captain," as he calls him elsewhere ("When Lilacs" 255). Withering away but "ever-returning," the perennial lilac resembles that "drooping star in the west"—a natural spectacle of death and resurgence that repeats itself, over and over again, before the unbelieving eyes of a nation that has already witnessed too many deaths (255). This time, the transience of human grandeur and natural beauty are tied to both personal regret and collective trauma, and there is a yearning to snatch from death a permanent "likeness" (a paradox that drove Whitman's lifelong fascination with photography). Whitman's poetic lilacs are there to last and yet also to fade, "I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring" (255). The President's untimely death appears unnatural; unlike lilacs, he shall not return to drench the land in a purple haze (in Christianity, a color signaling a state of transition and change). And yet his legacy will guide the nation—lovingly entangled with that trinity of "lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of [the poet's] soul" (262).

## Rose

Henry Ward Beecher heard about the President's assassination on his journey home, after holding his soon-to-be famous speech at the raising of the Union flag at Fort Sumter. Lincoln had personally asked him to find words of consolation for the Southern population. On a symbolic level, he not only proclaimed

a new era of national reconciliation but provided closure to the then popular narrative that the war had been caused by his sister Harriet. The latter was soon to grow so fond of the South that she purchased a plantation and celebrated, in *Palmetto Leaves* (1873), the abundance of yellow jessamine (grace, with tenderness and sense combined) and magnolia (perseverance) that grew in her new home state, South Carolina. Her brother's name, of course, was associated with less flowery items: in the late 1850s he had famously sent twenty-five rifles (counterbalanced by twenty-five Bibles) to Kansas, to an antislavery group that opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1868, however, Henry had abandoned the revolution. His first and only novel, *Norwood*, features an imaginary New England community, the "brood-combs" (sic) of an ideal America (Beecher 4). The central female character is named after the queen of flowers—Rose is an extraordinarily intelligent artistic and medical talent. Before the war she studies under the zoologist Louis Agassiz; during the war she expertly performs surgery on a wounded soldier (something that is historically unheard of), and for some time afterward she helps nursing veterans. Coming of age during the Civil War, she knows instinctively where she belongs when peace is about to arrive. The bright and beautiful Rose turns into a self-contented flower lady—taking endless rounds in the garden she has created just outside of her father's library. Rose is ever eager to converse with her father's visitors who praise her for knowing "every plant that grows in this region in the same easy and natural way that she knows all her neighbors. She can tell me the floral calendar of every month. She knows the structure of plants—vegetable physiology, of course; but, in her way of conceiving things, plants have a domestic life" (199-200). After the narrative has repudiated all possible allusions to a feminist logic of female independence, Rose comes into the full bloom as is implied by her name: when she eventually marries a man similar to the young Beecher himself, she happily declares that from here on she will be "a naiad to every rill in your soul; and if your heart were deep as the ocean, I will be the sea-nymph, and gather white corals from the very depths, and bring out hidden treasures from its caves!" (542). Entirely self-sufficient and without a trace of that stubbornness and regret that marked her antebellum sisters, this queen of flowers is the emerging nation's ideal citizen—a constant inspiration to her husband who builds his authority on what is seen as the natural consent of the governed, among them northern blacks and freedmen who prefer to live behind fences.

Meanwhile, Esther Hill Hawks sets up the first interracial school in Smyrna, Florida, and continues to receive flowers from her students (Winslow Homer's 1875 painting "Taking a Sunflower to the Teacher" comes to mind here). When the school is set on fire a few years later, she moves back North and starts her own medical practice, specializing in gynecology.

## Granite

In the early 1880s, almost ten years before the story was published as a book (*Mizora*, 1889), the *Cincinnati Examiner* printed a couple of installments about an unknown country where “[a]nimals and domestic fowls were long extinct,” thus causing a “weird silence” (Lane 54). The anonymous author of this strange scene was a middle-aged schoolteacher named Mary Bradley Lane; a woman we know little about to this day. If she seems radical now, she was certainly back then, and yet her views were deeply informed by the scientific debates, philosophical struggles, and collective needs of a restless era. In *Mizora* nature must be tamed to allow for aesthetic appreciation. This is not to ignore that in the late nineteenth century, the death of species, including birds (some of which were hunted to extinction for their feathers), was followed by a nationwide call for responsive policies. And yet the desire for tranquility and structure was excessive: still haunted by images of natural destruction wrought by war, Lane’s audience was spared the more threatening aspects of America’s landscapes and could find consolation in the “glorious atmosphere” of a feminized picturesque idyll, lying “asleep in voluptuous beauty” (15). Once we move beyond this “enchanted territory,” the description centers on the ordering perspective and symmetry of a European garden (15). Carefully arranged and highly artificial, it is organized around a defining center, a marble structure that houses a gigantic college, framed by stairs, fountains and water basins. It is here, right below the rim, that “a wreath of blood red roses, that looked as though they had just been plucked from the stems” meets the eye of the narrating “I” (64). She, the visitor from the real world, reacts stunned—not scandalized—upon realizing that the queen of flowers is not a temporary ornament but “the work of an artist, and durable as granite” (64). Not much is left of that “blush of bashfulness” that *Flora’s Dictionary* attaches to the red rose’s “angel whiteness.”

If traditional beauty is eternal in *Mizora*, and nature is an “effect” of “something charming,” they are both brought about exclusively by superior female talent and skill (17). Home to a tribe of hyper-intelligent blonde women, the land of *Mizora* is run by coordinated collective talent that in its organization resembles a beehive: the blondes study and experiment enthusiastically in order to develop their all-female nation further. In their version of the pursuit of happiness, everything falls into place.

Their population is the result of (a not-so-)natural selection—the Civil War and its even more chaotic aftermath had laid bare the enormity of men’s inherent inferiority, kicking off a long process of natural selection which eventually led to the extinction of the male gender. Freed from male disaster and from the restraining effect of the “dark race,” the novel’s Darwinian victors discover “the secret of life” in their laboratories, which allows them to produce ever new daughters for their nation (92, 103). This ultimately helps them

abandon the toilsome lives of their ancestors: the pairing of female sensibility with science makes even trimming an unruly rosebush into a desired form and its flowery abundance appear excessive and rude. It is through art (especially sculpture) that the daily battle against the vegetable kingdom can be won, and through modern technology that the dust in the living room can be banished. Ironically, racial segregation is no longer necessary in the eugenic feminist state: with its emphasis on natural selection and natural hierarchy, the Mizoran universe is surprisingly similar to Beecher's *Norwood*; a "cosmic success story" where everything falls into place. Yet while in the minister's novel, a gang of happy freedmen allows for a leisurely, inspirational lifestyle in the white village, it is little machines that enable the essentially posthuman world of the monumental blondes.

There is, of course, a dystopian impulse in the Mizoran notion of human-centered, proto-fascist biopower—even their awestruck visitor decides to leave after fifteen years of admiration: she is, after all, a brunette, and dearly misses the non-rational dimensions of the human, our animal side, which the Mizorans eliminated so successfully, along with all the roses.

## Color

Although Reconstruction was officially over, the state of political instability continued: sectional relations were fragile, economic suffering was widespread, and former slaves still flocked to the cities, looking for safety from white supremacist violence, but also for work and community. In the late eighteen-seventies, Walt Whitman traveled to Philadelphia and collected "queer, taking, rather sad" impressions of a tramp family, consisting of a wife whose "figure and gait told misery, terror, and destitution," and "a real hermit, living in a lonesome spot, hard to get at, rocky," who does not reveal "his life, or story, or tragedy, or whatever it is" (*Specimen Days* 115, 116, 131). When Whitman reaches his destination, the densely populated Chestnut Street in downtown Philadelphia, he lists:

The peddlers on the sidewalk ("sleeve-buttons, three to five cents")—the handsome little fellow with canary-bird whistles—the cane men, toy men, toothpick men—the old woman squatted in a heap on the cold stone flags, with her basket of matches, pins, and tape—the young negro mother, sitting, begging, with her two little coffee-color'd twins on her lap—the beauty of the cramm'd conservatory of rare flowers, flaunting reds, yellows, snowy lilies, incredible orchids, at the Baldwin mansion near Twelfth street . . . (128)

Cursory as it may seem, the street scene is carefully conceived as it refuses to isolate race relations from the larger kaleidoscope of precariousness. And yet the emblematic family of three mentioned here oscillates between belonging and

marginalization. Symbolically placed at the lower end of a society that struggles economically, and wholly dependent on the support of others, the “young negro mother” of twins (signaling her fecundity) is the least hopeful of those who try their luck on Chestnut Street. Powerfully juxtaposed against a description of the “conservatory of rare flowers” and “the Baldwin mansion,” her misery suggests a racial dimension that complicates this seemingly harmonious picture of multifaceted poverty and individual effort. In a metonymic shift, the image of the black mother with her children is captured in the metaphorical conservatory, waiting to be admired just like the “incredible orchids” of the wealthy.

As has been argued with regard to the poetic figure of the “black whale,” Whitman warranted particular attention to color as metaphor, and there is often a strong racial component to this usage (Beach 55-100). Immediately linked to the black mother and her “coffee-color’d twins,” the “rare flowers, flaunting reds, yellows, snowy lilies, incredible orchids” invoke popular definitions of the shades of blackness that circulated in nineteenth-century America and that were often associated with the names of flowers. (The antebellum folk song “The Yellow Rose of Texas” comes to mind here: “There’s a yellow rose in Texas, that I am going to see / No other darky knows her, no darky only me”). In Whitman’s street scene, despair and poverty, beauty and abundance, but also exoticism and a sexualized lack of constraint are intertwined. The metaphor is dense and multilayered: cast as an exhilarating spectacle of otherness, the black family beautifies a new, lively, and diverse America. And yet the ensemble is strangely removed from the bustling street scene; it appears “cramm’d in” the conservatory of the rich white man’s mansion: after all, this nineteenth-century tableau vivant puts on display the “rare flowers” of slavery and miscegenation. Whitman, who could never bring himself to fully welcome African Americans as part of his postwar democratic vision, left it to his readers to decide whether, and to what degree, this “exotic” constellation would be free from the trauma and economic deprivation that, years after the Emancipation Proclamation, continued to separate them from the hopes and opportunities of white Americans.

### **Beguiling Scents**

By including orchids as exotic objects of contemplation, Whitman deviated from his usual repertoire of native species. This is not to say that he did not seek inspiration outside the confines of his country—he was, in fact, fascinated by the mystical and spiritual traditions of Asia, and Indian thought in particular helped him on his quest for wholeness and for the spiritual re-invigoration of the American self. Whitman lived long enough to observe how American

sensationalist media turned to urban Chinatowns to cater to their readers' desire for a pleasurable thrill. But by 1898, when his country annexed Hawaii and decided to join Europe's imperialist venture into Asia, the "good gray poet" lay buried in Camden (he had died in 1892). It fell upon a younger generation, one that was born after the Civil War, to cast a critical eye on this late nineteenth-century hunger for an obscure East. In Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901), a city club for the nouveaux riches seeks to fill the spiritual void that it has created by inviting a fakir for a leisurely teatime. One of their favorite guests is a Japanese youth who "delivered himself of the most astonishing poems, vague, unrhymed, unmetrical lucubrations, incoherent, bizarre" (Norris 157).

What Norris worries about is not the "real" Asia of trade and commerce (although transpacific expansion is clearly an issue in *The Octopus*) but what Americans make of the new frontier, west of California. How exactly are they affected, as individuals and as a collective, by the transpacific endeavor? In *The Octopus* they lose their sense of belonging to either place or time. While urban elites flock around the latest yogi to circumvent social responsibilities at their very doorstep, the less privileged are personally doomed. For them, the dream of the Orient brings individual development to an untimely halt. The tragedy unfolds in the subplot involving Vanamee: the shepherd, in this wheat-growing community that most of the book focuses on, is traumatized by the rape and murder of his beloved Angéle, the daughter of a flower farmer. A recurring, oriental-looking apparition dominates the deserted lover's mind and spirit, and he avails himself of telepathic prayer to conjure up the ever-same nightly encounter:

She came to him from out of the flowers, the smell of roses in her hair of gold, that hung in two straight plaits on either side of her face; the reflection of the violets in the profound dark blue of her eyes, perplexing, heavy-lidded, almond-shaped, oriental; the aroma and the imperial red of the carnations in her lips, with their almost Egyptian fullness; the whiteness of the lilies, the perfume of the lilies, and the lilies' slender balancing grace in her neck. . . . The folds of her dress gave off the enervating scent of poppies. (72)

Repeated at various moments in the novel, the scene performs narrative trauma by linking the apparition to an exaggerated visual and olfactory impression of flowers. Vanamee falls prey to the multi-sensual power of an abysmally beautiful bouquet: a mix of presumed innocence (roses), "female love" (violets and carnations), "purity" and "sweetness" (lilies), whose scent is superimposed by the perfume of poppies—a plant associated with consolation and death (according to *Flora's Dictionary*), but also with San Francisco's opium dens. Unsurprisingly, this story about dangerous blooms ends in addiction: when Vanamee eventually meets Angéle's daughter, who looks just like her mother,

his obsession transforms into madness. For him who fails to understand the multiple meanings of flowers, there is no love, no home, and no sanity.

### **Into the Open**

In the nineteen-twenties, the language of flowers was no longer à la mode, but roses continued to be roses, and baby girls were still given names such as Daisy, Heather, and Violet. Gertrude and Georgia deviated from the established floral scheme, and it may in fact have made it easier for them to use flowers to break with the dead forms of the past. Let us not repeat Gertrude's famous repetition or resort again to discussing what flowers and vaginas have in common. O'Keeffe had mocked the persistently male gaze of her critics during her lifetime by referencing Alfred Stieglitz's famous *Portrait of O'Keeffe*, a collection of approximately three hundred photographs that her husband took over a period of more than twenty years. Initially, these (often nude) portraits threatened to destroy the career of the young woman, but she soon managed to use them as inspiration for a particularly creative, cross-media dialogue with her husband. One can easily find, in the black-and-white *Portrait* photographs, the model for O'Keeffe's "Alligator Pears"—two greenish fruit that protrude seductively, not from a leisurely-worn nightgown but from a folded piece of pure white fabric.

One way of looking at O'Keeffe's oeuvre is by concentrating on her experiments with form and color. Flowers were just a beginning, before she ventured into the open landscapes of New Mexico with its shades of white, brown, red, ochre—and a blue "that will always be there as it is now after all man's destruction is finished." The sparseness of that landscape allowed her to combine a ram's head with a single blue morning glory or a white hollyhock, and a bleached cow's skull with two calico roses. These flowers, as well as their replications, do not decorate what remains of an animal after death, but lend new meaning to it simply by sharing the same space—a seemingly white surface, often hovering above the glorious colors of a mountain that talks and sings to us, to you.

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