

“Here is adhesiveness—it is not previously fashioned—it is apropos; Do you know what it is, as you pass, to be loved by strangers? Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls?”—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road” (1860)

Is it possible to be intimate with someone you haven't met? To those already wary of Whitman's hyperbolically grand ambitions for himself and for poetry, the centrality to his work of this curious question will not be reassuring. Whatever forbearance one brings to Whitman's moments of bravado, however figuratively one tries to read his boasts about the poet who would be sole arbiter of national life, a single stubborn fact persists: virtually every strand of Whitman's utopian thought devolves upon, and is anchored by, an unwavering belief in the capacity of strangers to recognize, desire, and be intimate with one another. Whitman's declarations of aesthetic intent, for instance, all circle back to a quality of intimate affection he promises to extend to an entire nation of readers who are, to him, perfectly unknown. In the 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he writes: “[W]hile I am about it, I would like to make full confession. I also sent out ‘Leaves of Grass’ to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever.”¹ Among its other indications, this “full confession” bears the impress of Whitman's earliest and most lasting formal allegiances. Having begun his career as an attentive student of the forms and methods of the

era's two most prominent national media—print journalism and oratorical address—Whitman soon resolved to fashion a revolutionary expressive form that would combine the two, accommodating both the physical immediacy he revered so much in oratory and the general availability of print.² By 1855 he had developed an idiom of self-presentation capable of the most intimate prodding and solicitation yet whose often thrilling interpellating effects depend precisely upon the mutual anonymity of author and reader. “This hour I tell things in confidence,” says the narrator of “Song of Myself.” “I might not tell everybody but I will tell you.”³ Tugging flirtatiously against the generic inclusiveness of the anonymous “you” in these lines is the sly suggestion that we are, each of us, selected for the poet’s confidences. From anonymity to selective intimacy, this swift telescoping of address is perhaps the signature motion of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, and it is certainly the place where an examination of the coy solicitousness of Whitman’s carefully molded persona ought to begin. For here as elsewhere in Whitman’s corpus, we are offered the strange pleasure of being solicited by an author who, while admitting he does not and cannot “know” any of us, nevertheless pledges himself as an intimate companion, bosom comrade, and secret lover.⁴

Whitman’s passionate embrace of the stranger-reader also helps explain his avowedly political ambitions for the medium of poetry; indeed, Whitman’s fascination with the idea of strangers takes us directly into one of the central paradoxes of antebellum literary nationalism. Like many other nationalist authors of the period (including writers as differently inclined as Hawthorne, Douglass, Melville, and Stowe), Whitman’s passionate love for “America” only barely exceeds his vitriolic contempt for the state, its institutions, and its agents. (Lincoln was an important, and rare, exception.) “Where is the real America?” he wonders in *The Eighteenth Presidency!* (1856), an altogether violent polemic. “Where is the spirit of the manliness and the common-sense of These States?” Of one thing he is certain: “It does not appear in the government” (*PP*, 1334).⁵ The problem nationalist authors like Whitman must address is thus plain: if the state fails so utterly to account for, circumscribe, or accommodate true “Americanness,” of what exactly is nationality made? In a now famous passage from the 1876 preface, where he discusses “Calamus” and its “political significance,” Whitman gives his most unequivocal answer:

In my opinion, it is by a fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all young fellows, north and south, east and west—it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it, that the United States of the future, (I cannot too often repeat,) are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal'd into a living union. (*PP*, 1035)

Whitman cannot too often repeat that the nation is an entity not of institutions and abstract strictures but of relation: to talk of “America” is to talk of the bonds of “beautiful and sane affection of man for man” that “effectually weld” a dispersed and mutually anonymous citizenry. The “real America” is thus not to be found in the government, because governments deal only in proclamations and strictures, to which one’s expected relation is that of allegiance or, more pointedly, obedience. For Whitman, nationality consists not in legal compulsion or geographical happenstance but in the specifically affective attachments that somehow tie together people who have never seen one another, who live in different climates, come from different cultures, and harbor wildly different needs and aspirations. To be properly American is thus, as Whitman conceives it, to feel oneself related in a quite intimate way to a world of people not proximate or even known. That these “fervent” intimacies might include even sexual desire (and certainly do not preclude it) simply shows the extent of Whitman’s belief in the richness and affective depth of which relations between strangers are capable; and from this belief springs his utopian vision of a United States given coherence not by the state but by the passionate ties that join its far-flung citizens.⁶

Some interpretive leverage may be gained, then, in pretending ignorance for a moment of Whitman’s other nominations (the Poet of Democracy, the Poet of the Body, the Poet of Nonconformity) so that we might declare him instead the great Poet of Attachment. As the obverse of Emily Dickinson, whose charmed realms are those of solitude and inwardness, the Whitman we conjure here looks always to represent, consecrate, and, at his most ambitious, actually sponsor intimacies, affectionate ties, bonds with and among a world of people who are, to each other and to him, strangers. (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” frames the matter most succinctly, when Whitman asks of his unborn

future readers: “What is it then between us?” [*PP*, 310].) In this essay, I explore the contours of this unlikely attachment, this intimacy that bypasses familiarity, looking in particular at a few of the terms Whitman draws upon to corroborate his dream of an intimate nationality.⁷ My contention is that between 1855 and 1860, in the initial version of “Song of Myself” and in the “Calamus” poems, Whitman considers and finally adopts, even as he revises and in some respects resists, two conceptual models for the anonymous intimacies of national life. He finds these models in the array of languages surrounding race and sex.

We are of course accustomed to thinking of sexuality and race as manifestly political terms to the degree that they describe not intimacies but identity; to the degree, that is, that they mark and differentiate types of people. Whitman’s work is uniquely instructive in this context, since it allows us to see with startling clarity how race and sex acquire political potency in antebellum America not only (and perhaps not even principally) as differential markers of social status and identity but as languages of attachment. To Whitman, in other words, race and sex offer enormously powerful conceptual models with which to imagine how persons who have never met might yet enjoy a special kind of bond with one another; as such, they are to him nationalist languages of the highest consequence. Unfolding around Whitman’s efforts to wrench these languages into alignments more exactly suited to his utopian nationalism, as well as to the distinctive stylistics he was bit by bit assembling, is one of the great uncaptured dramas of the early poetry.

A Sympathetic Stranger

How, then, do Whitman’s grand nationalist ambitions work in the poetry itself? It’s wise to begin where Whitman’s poetic career itself auspiciously begins, with “Song of Myself” as it appears (as yet untitled) in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. This poem traces an immense, progressive self-dilation, whereby a narrative persona called “Walt Whitman, an American” comes to be the living repository for all the teeming data of American life, past and future: “I am an acme of things accomplished and I an encloser of things to be” (*LG*, 48, 77). Part of the extraordinary, often disarming, bravado of the poem lies in the breeziness of the poet’s presumption that absolutely every corner and crevice of national life falls firmly within his perceptual ken. Striving

throughout to uphold his claim in the preface that the true American poet shall be in every way “commensurate with a people”—shall be, in fact, “the age transfigured” (*LG*, 6, 21)—Whitman presents a nation whose defining attribute, even more than its fascinating variousness, seems to be its transparency to the consuming poetic consciousness. The enumerative catalog is of course the most remarked upon rhetorical form through which Whitman looks to evince this comprehensive mutual absorption of poet and nation, but it is not the only, nor even the principal, verbal strategy he employs.⁸

Another prominent strategy in the poem, felt perhaps most immediately, is that of perspectival fracture and manipulation. In section 2, for instance, Whitman presents himself in a rapid-fire succession of rhetorical forms and stances, each of which implies a different proximity or location with respect to a scene described. In the space of twenty-four lines, the narrative voice jumps through the following modes of address: omniscient descriptive (“Houses and rooms are full of perfumes”), subjective testimonial (“I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it”), fragmentary declarative (“My respiration and inspiration, . . . the beating of my heart”), interrogative (“Have you reckoned a thousand acres much?”), imperative (“Stop this day and night with me”), concluding finally in a prophetic second-person address wherein the promise of the poem is summarized: “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (*LG*, 25–26). By the terrific speed with which he darts and charges through this extended range of rhetorics and modes of self-presentation, the poet attests to the vastness of his perspective; the eyes of this poem are not merely Whitman’s own, since he will filter and encompass all imaginable vantages, “all sides.” Speaking paratactically from a multiplicity of angles, the poet works to situate himself everywhere—both within and at a distance from an impossibly diverse set of locales.

Remarkably, though, this deliberate self scattering in no way disperses or depersonalizes the poem’s center of consciousness (as it does in, say, the work of a Whitman heir like John Ashbery). For that fractured perspective also remains tangibly Whitman’s own by virtue of its being codified in an idiom whose handful of stylistic idiosyncrasies we are quickly taught to recognize as a kind of discursive fingerprint, a signature. Reading Whitman is ever a process of acquisition and acculturation. His grammatical contortions are so aggressive

and his rhetorical postures so distinctive that each verse paragraph, whatever else it describes, also provides painstaking instruction in how to distinguish Whitman's perspective from any other. We learn, for instance, that rhetorical questions pitched in the second person contain one of Whitman's favorite forms of emphasis and are among the devices with which he tries to anticipate and actually conscript the perspectives of his audience ("Have you practiced so long to learn to read?" [LG, 26]). We learn that sentence fragments consisting mainly of noun clauses are allowed to follow one after another, often at great length, for the purpose of forming the heterogeneous details of national life into a kind of eternal-present tableau (as in the catalogs of sections 33 and 37). We learn that neologisms—nouns twisted into verbs, nonce words ("foofoos," "fatherstuff"), verbs congealed into nouns ("It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror")—are cultivated to dramatize the poet's struggle to expand the descriptive range of the American idiom and to make it (as he says in the preface) "the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible" (LG, 23). We learn further that unlikely figures and word juxtapositions are among this poet's favorite means for unsettling the familiarity of common idioms and for returning sharpness and tactility to figures dulled by overuse. "Echoes, ripples, *buzzed whispers*," for example, describes the whispers as bees, and in his announcement, "Only the lull I like, *the hum of your valved voice*," the potentially incorporeal voice is transformed into a mechanical, brassy instrument, whose valves are released and depressed in the production of sound (LG, 25, 28, my emphasis). The combination of these tics and devices makes up what we might simply call the poet's "style," through which he asserts the presence of a continuous and particular organizing consciousness.⁹ The all-important effect of persona, in Whitman, is essentially rhetorical: by suffusing every register of discourse and exposition with these verbal cues at the level of grammar and syntax, word and phrase, he establishes the center of consciousness in his poems as a kind of character, bristling with arrogance and charm, whose tangible locality anchors the poem's enormous perspective.

More than anything else, it is our faith in the consistency of that local persona that carries us through the thronging catalogs of sections 15, 33, and 37, where Whitman's perspectival position seems to flatten as it expands to cover every inch of the nation. Here the poet's omnivorous power of perception manifests itself not by rhetori-

cal sleights but by plain assertions of identification, which are also a kind of self-disruption or self-evaporation: "I am the hounded slave," "I am the mashed fireman," "I am the old artillerist" (*LG*, 62, 63). The momentary thinning of Whitman's local persona allows this sequence of self-identifications to surface, adding to the variety of perspectives over which he claims an increasingly existential authority.¹⁰ Alternating with the poem's moments of tender revelation and hushed awe, these asserted equivalences fashion Whitman as a figure whose endearing particularity ("Washes and razors for foofoos . . . for me freckles and a bristling beard" [*LG*, 46]) in no way inhibits the expansive generality of his being. "Of these one and all tend inward to me," he writes at the conclusion of the poem's first extended catalog, "and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am" (*LG*, 40). This knitting together of the uninhibitedly general and the recognizably particular—a conjoining whose success depends intimately upon the unbroken rhetorical effect of persona—provides the backbone for the poet's grand project of national representativeness. Thus does Walt Whitman, "one of the roughs," emerge simultaneously as "a kosmos," a universalized self from whose unique affections no one need be excluded.¹¹ As he proclaims open-endedly in section 22: "I am he attesting sympathy" (*LG*, 46).

Such open-endedness is of course something of a provocation as well. Along with much cheerful adulation over the years, it has provoked recriminations, incredulity, and outright contempt. An indicative case is that of D. H. Lawrence, who angrily indicts the poet for having offered to prostitutes, syphilitics, and slaves a misbegotten, undoubtedly counterfeit affection. His two-line "Retort to Whitman," while it lacks the detail of his critique in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, spares none of its venom: "And whoever walks a mile full of false sympathy / walks to the funeral of the whole human race."¹² Mean-spirited as it may be, Lawrence's revision seems nevertheless to capture one distinctive aspect of the experience of reading Whitman. Though we may not feel as immoderately irked as Lawrence appears to be—and though we may not find the explanation for his distaste for Whitman's sympathy at all resonant—the quality of exasperated patience he describes will probably be familiar to most of us.¹³ It would be a benumbed reader indeed who could trundle through *Leaves of Grass* without once feeling even a twinge of exactly Lawrence's kind of irritation. What is exasperating about the ecstatic

Whitman—what Lawrence responds to so heatedly—is not necessarily the inertness of some of the catalogs, their unrelenting loudness, or even the poet’s plain willingness to be tedious. Rather, one can easily be unsettled by the unhesitating manner with which this poet moves to proclaim the transparency of any imaginable occurrence, any possible vantage, to the vastness of his person. Such gestures, while they do provide for a bravado not without its appeal, seem to require a degree of nuance and finesse that not every passage in “Song of Myself” achieves—and which some, in fact, almost alarmingly lack. To put this differently, there is something embarrassingly immodest about the unflustered confidence with which the poet casts himself in often improbable roles, and about the immediacy with which he identifies himself with the downtrodden, the suffering, the enslaved.¹⁴ Lawrence’s skepticism, though idiosyncratic to say the least, does point to an unevenness of tone and execution in “Song of Myself” that is accounted for neither by the poet’s fondness for an improvisatory roughness in exposition nor by the mutability of his persona.

The implications of Lawrence’s reading prompt a slippery question about Whitman’s sympathy: not “Of what is it made?” but “Is it credible?” If the question seems impertinent, it is nevertheless not easily disregarded, for debates over the credibility of Whitman’s sympathy must also be, more intimately, contestations over the location of that credibility, over the proprietary ground of criticism itself. To ask after Whitman’s credibility, in other words, is implicitly to define where in the poems one thinks such credibility (or conviction, or intention, or politics) most meaningfully expresses itself. Lawrence, for instance, seems irritated by the simple fact of Whitman’s claimed identities: to assert that one is a slave, a syphilitic, a prostitute, he argues, is to offer a forgery of the soul’s instinctual inclination toward such beings. Meaning for Lawrence thus resides mainly in gesture—in the general impulses to exclude, embrace, champion, or condemn specific historical characters. And in this he is not alone.

Much of the strongest historicist criticism of Whitman follows from premises remarkably similar to Lawrence’s, locating in the poet’s various gestures of identification and inclusion a range of cognate ideological positions. The first thing to note about this approach is the ease with which it accommodates both the most valorizing and most disparaging evaluations of the poet. For example, the identical poetic gesture (“I am the hounded slave,” say) can be shown to indicate a

democratic, revolutionary will-to-include as well as a self-amplifying, unearned expropriation of the suffering of others. The difference depends primarily upon the historical archive to which the critic has made the poet answerable.¹⁵ In either case, the actual execution of those claims, in language, remains oddly superfluous, as though the realm of verbal texture were the last place to look for any leverage on questions of political or historical concern. Though not exactly the equivalent of reading Shakespeare for the plot, this blandly “historical” approach tends to presume that all but the most rudimentary aspects of this utterly distinctive poet’s form and style are null sets, incapable of delivering to a politically attuned sensibility any mother lode of meaning.¹⁶ What results, finally, is the thorough disconnection of the “politics” of Whitman’s texts from the basic elements of which they are made, and by which they are distinguished as Whitman’s own.

Restoring the link between the broader social content and textual particularity of Whitman’s poetry requires, in the first place, learning to read his rhetorical collapses—the formal unevenness—as among the most faithful markers of upheaval and complication in his political ambitions. One way to approach this challenge is to recall how central the deployment of persona is to Whitman’s political ambitions for poetry, to his desire to achieve in it a fully national representativeness. A renewed attentiveness to the rhetorical constitution of Whitman’s persona—to its lapses and points of inconsistency—might offer us an angle into a politics that exceeds mere gesture or stance. Now, to ground a politics in the question of persona is to incur a number of interpretive risks. Pertinent here in particular is Michael Warner’s cautionary point about the “obsessive” return in Whitman criticism to “a referential language of character”—a return that betrays what Warner, following Vincent Crapanzano, disparagingly calls “the ideology of self.” Undoubtedly, character attribution has offered a way to refigure any number of the poet’s projects of world revision as efforts in “soul-making,” in tutelary self-perfection: such “characterizing” scrutiny, Warner rightly contends, domesticates Whitman’s many avowedly public ambitions.¹⁷ Yet the insistence upon Whitman’s anti-characterizing radicalness does seem willing to ignore what are, in Leo Bersani’s apt phrase, “the by no means unfounded and inconsiderable pleasure(s) of recognition”—of *character* recognition—upon which most of the poems’ intimacies depend.¹⁸ This poet who shouts

lists and enumerations may well understand the generality and impersonality that print affords, but we are not likely to confuse his poetry or poetic perspective with that of anyone else; and this recognizable particularity is, as we have seen, very much a part of Whitman's political project. What sustains the appealing recognizability of the poet's persona, I emphasize again, are the signature motions of language—of style—that populate even the most polyglot of Whitman's expositions. That is, Whitman arrays even his most self-displacing claims of identification in an idiom that is unmistakably his own, whose littlest syntactical tic, lexical juxtaposition, or word cluster announces the presence of an eminently particular poetic consciousness.

Indeed, the lighter the touch by which the poet twists or pressures an established discursive mode, the more deeply impressed the whole of the passage becomes with his identifying stamp. Such is the elegance of the runaway slave passage in section 10:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,
 I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
 Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey
 and weak,
 And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,
 And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and
 bruised feet,
 And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him
 some coarse clean clothes,
 And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his
 awkwardness,
 And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and
 ankles;
 He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed
 north,
 I had him sit next me at table . . . my firelock leaned in the
 corner. (*LG*, 33–34)

Whitman's reserve, the intimacy of the details he supplies, his canny manipulation of verb tense and narrative expectation, are rewarded in the passage's final glance toward the "firelock" leaning in the corner, unused but promising as direct and violent a resistance to slave power as Whitman would ever offer. Moreover, the ease with which

he accommodates this potentially unwieldy allegory of Christ's ministrations to an idiom not yet completely stripped of his identifying verbal tics and cues (as in the slight grammatical compression of "I saw him limpsey and weak") asserts the presence in the passage of an organizing consciousness that is strikingly continuous with that of the poem's less heightened episodes. By drawing the more quotidian narrative persona so unobtrusively into this scene of enormous ethical consequence—by underlining rhetorically the unbroken continuity of the nonchalant Whitman and the Whitman of great moral action—the poet gathers the accumulated force of all the poem's episodes behind his promise of sympathy.¹⁹ We can measure the amplitude and depth of the sympathetic gesture in this particular passage, in other words, to the degree that its verbal texture allows it to resonate everywhere else in the poem.

We see here, at the very least, that the problem to which Lawrence points lies not in the mere fact of Whitman's assertion of a sympathetic bond with strangers quite unlike himself but in the local expressions of those bonds. For if Whitman is capable of extraordinarily nuanced demonstrations of sympathy, as in the runaway slave passage, he is also prepared to offer much more ambiguous fare. Consider the following two different verse-paragraphs, separated from each other in section 33 by only a stanza:

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
 The courage of present times and all times;
 How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the
 steamship, and death chasing it up and down the storm,
 How he knuckled tight and gave not back one inch, and was
 faithful of days and faithful of nights,
 And chalked in large letters on a board, Be of good cheer, We
 will not desert you;
 How he saved the drifting company at last,
 How the lank loose-gowned women looked when boated from the
 side of their prepared graves,
 How the silent old-faced infants, and the lifted sick, and the
 sharp-lipped unshaved men;
 All this I swallow and it tastes good. . . . I like it well, and it
 becomes mine,
 I am the man. . . . I suffered. . . . I was there.

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 I am the hounded slave. . . . I wince at the bite of the dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me . . . crack and again crack the
 marksman,
 I clutch the rails of the fence. . . . my gore dribs thinned with the
 ooze of my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,
 They taunt my dizzy ears . . . they beat me violently over the
 head with their whip-stocks.
 Agonies are one of my changes of garments;
 I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. . . . I myself
 become the wounded person,
 My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.
 (LG, 62–63)

Rather than referring to and amplifying the tonalities of the runaway slave episode, this latter passage seems instead to recall the painful moment in the preface when Whitman writes: “The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots” (LG, 15). Part of the reason the statement “Agonies are one of my changes of garments” reads infelicitously here is that it follows a passage whose realization is so remarkably less surprising and vivid than the shipwreck stanza that preceded it. “I wince at the bite of dogs” has none of the sharpness or canny unpredictability of, for instance, “the silent old-faced infants.” While not saddled with the clear lexical wrongness of “*cheer up slaves*,” it nonetheless sounds as though it might have been lifted from something as saccharine as Longfellow’s “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” (“He saw the fire of the midnight camp, / And heard at times a horse’s tramp / And a bloodhound’s distant bay”).²⁰ Nowhere in the latter passage do the signature flourishes of rhetoric and grammar find room to extend themselves, and this cramping contributes greatly to the stilted, ventriloquistic quality of the verse.²¹ At this crucial moment of compassionate self-extension, Whitman seems simply to reproduce, without in the least enlivening, one of the standard genres of his day.

Far from the devastating “critique of tepid humanitarianism” Martin Klammer claims it to be, the episode seems an instance of exactly the kind of failed sympathy that so exasperates Lawrence. The star-

ting rhetorical slackness of the “hounded slave” passage—its uncounted derivativeness—confronts us with a moment in which the poet’s sympathy fails quite conspicuously to cross the divide of race (which is also the divide between free and unfree), a moment made only more perplexing by the formal achievement of the runaway slave passage that precedes it by more than six-hundred lines. Though that earlier passage should alert us to the interpretive dangers of simply ascribing to Whitman an unsavory and untranscended racialist position, I want to suggest nevertheless that these moments of abrupt formal collapse do record something of a tremor in Whitman’s geography of sympathy. For what I have deemed the generic, borrowed quality of Whitman’s testimony to cross-racial sympathy stands in vivid contrast to the force of stylistic particularity with which he is able to invest testimonies not of racial sympathy but of racial solidarity, as in the voice that speaks through these sentences: “Who believes that Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so?”²² The abiding power to dispirit and shock contained in this often quoted passage must derive at least in part from the fact that the rhetorical gestures its author inhabits are so seamlessly, so unmistakably of-a-piece with those of “Song of Myself,” whose differently motivated author writes:

Who has done his day’s work and will soonest be through with
his supper?

Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already too late?
(LG, 85)

There is no pretending that the author of the prose sentences in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, written in 1858 to praise the state constitution of Oregon for its exclusion of blacks, is anyone but the poet who attests sympathy; indeed, the two are the same down to the idiosyncrasies of grammar and syntax by which they evoke their enunciating particularity. That Whitman’s voice should find such a comfortable home in this patently exclusionary politicking is in at least one respect not surprising, for the discourse of racist solidarity into which he fits himself is at the same time—like so much of “Song of Myself”—a discourse of sympathetic attachment, of intimate relation among strangers. That

is, his remarks on Oregon outline a quality of anonymous sympathy that is simply more local than that of “Song of Myself,” and more exclusive—a sympathy that travels strictly along the vein of the American citizens’ shared whiteness.

To a degree that might astonish us, the protocols of race in fact answer perfectly to the demands of Whitman’s ardent utopianism, as made particularly clear in his prose from the period. Even in the most nakedly partisan of his diatribes, Whitman manages to find a visionary strain; what that strain devolves upon, I argue, is his ability to see in race a way to describe the secret tissue of relatedness by which underrepresented citizens might eventually recognize each other and form a coalition. In *The Eighteenth Presidency!* he writes:

In fifteen of The States the three hundred and fifty thousand masters keep down the true people, the millions of white citizens, mechanics, farmers, boatmen, manufacturers, and the like, excluding them from politics and from office, and punishing by the lash, by tar and feathers, binding fast to rafts on the rivers or trees in the woods, and sometimes by death, all attempts to discuss the evils of slavery in its relations to the whites. (*PP*, 1335)

These “true citizens,” Whitman goes on to say, constitute “a new race . . . with resolute tread, soon to confront Presidents, Congresses, and parties” (*PP*, 1336). Whiteness defines the upstart group Whitman sketches here but not in the familiar way—not as the enabling distinction upon which claims to innate superiority rest (the enemies here are white as well).²³ Rather, whiteness appears in Whitman’s account as the element within which a variety of laboring identities (“TO BUTCHERS, SAILORS, STEVEDORES, AND DRIVERS OF HORSES—TO PLOUGHMEN, WOOD-CUTTERS, MARKETMEN, CARPENTERS, MASONS, AND LABORERS”) from very different localities (“Manhattan Island, Brooklyn, Newark, Boston, Worcester, Hartford, New Haven, Providence, Portland, Bangor, Augusta, Albany”) can experience themselves as attached to one another, related. In Whitman’s hands, that is, race gives name and place to a quality of attachment—potentially, of intimacy—between a dispersed and anonymous population. The exactness of conceptual fit ought to startle us: answering point by point to the nationalist desire to establish and sustain intimate associations across widespread localities of interest and need, the agency ascribed here to the mere fact of

whiteness simply accomplishes those connections and attachments. If Whitman dreamed about a way to describe the unifying intimacies of national life—and dreamed, moreover, of a way to imagine the coherence of a national citizenry, outside the decrees of the state—whiteness would have seemed an ideal vehicle.

What is perhaps most surprising, from this vantage, is the fact that the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* steadfastly declines to take up the cause of racial nationalism with any real vigor or seriousness. (Nor, of course, does Whitman make much of a sustained point to object to it, though in fleeting instances he snipes at racialist decorum by promising to “invite” to his table even “the heavy-lipped slave” [*LG*, 42]). Such racialism does bubble up, as I’ve suggested, in moments when the particularity of the poet’s rhetorical persona seems suddenly to evaporate: in certain instances of formal laxity, in passing turns of phrase (“cheer up slaves” is one), and in moments like that in the preface when Whitman refers to the United States as “the race of races” (*LG*, 6)—a phrase in which it is not at all clear whether the defining attribute of the American race is its plurality (the race of many races) or its exclusive superiority (the one best race). Still, these moments have none of the avidity of the 1858 column, nor do they link up with one another to form anything like a coherent position. The language of racial affiliation, though in some ways ideally suited to Whitman’s utopia of anonymous intimacies, nevertheless seems palpably to lack some essential quality without which the poet can make little use of it. A generous reading of this refused endorsement would likely contend that the idea of specifically racial intimacies, however it provides for Whitman’s utopian nationalism, grievously inhibits the scope of his embrace; because it excludes by definition so many persons to whom he feels inspired (by compassion? desire? arrogance?) to extend his intimacy, the poet, by this account, shrugs off the spurious unities of race.

But what if, by a less credulous reading, Whitman’s early career is taken not as an adjudication of one discourse of affiliation but as an adumbration of several at once? What if the language of racial intimacy is, in fact, complicated, entangled, and perhaps finally overruled by a rival model of intimacy and attachment? In this vein we might do well to observe that those comments about interracial “amalgamation” in the United States comprise what must be the drabest sex scene Whitman ever wrote.

Sex in Public

If “Song of Myself” is thus deeply ambivalent toward, though abidingly interested in, race as a language of transpersonal attachment, it is vastly less hesitant about sexual intimacy. Indeed, it is difficult not to read sexuality as a counternarrative to the racial nationalism Whitman sometimes endorses, since sexuality seems most intensely meaningful to him when it expresses a nearly boundless human capacity for relation to others, for affiliation. “The bodies of men and women engirth me,” he writes, “and I engirth them, / They will not let me off nor I them till I go with them and respond to them and love them” (*LG*, 116). The 1876 preface draws the connection between sexuality and the anonymous attachments of national life quite unambiguously: no longer does “America” exist as “the race of races,” as in the 1855 preface, but it is given form by the “endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship,” the “terrible, irrepressible yearning” and “never-satisfied appetite for sympathy” that animates its citizenry (*PP*, 1034–35). By this retrospective account, Whitman’s remarkably sudden loss of interest in racial conflict and meaning after 1855 makes a peculiar kind of sense.²⁴ For by 1860, in the poems of “Calamus” the poet has apparently given himself over to an idiom of attachment grounded not in the shaky affective promises of race but in the world-making power of sex.

The transition between these two strains of nationalism is in fact not nearly so tidy. In the first place, both models coexist, in uneasy accord, in the 1855 *Leaves*. (However Christian the allegory, the details of the runaway slave passage from “Song of Myself”—“[I] brought him water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet. . . . / And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles”—tremble with an erotic significance whose mutedness does nothing to cancel its charge.) What makes for messiness in the shift from one to the other, though, is the fact that the languages of sexual attachment available to Whitman are themselves as riddled with complication and incoherence as the available languages of race. This is perhaps the main reason why the “Calamus” poems, though they may well endeavor to describe U.S. nationality in terms of sexual ties, are nevertheless pointedly unforthcoming about where the definitional boundaries of the sexual actually lie. I suggest, in fact, that Whitman’s refusal in “Calamus” to define sex as a quality of attachment

fundamentally distinct from any other—his refusal to circumscribe sexuality in any definite set of acts or relations—constitutes what is arguably the most consequential intervention in U.S. sexual ideology he would ever make. And that intervention, as we shall see, is as much a nationalist act as it is proof against a nascent homophobia.

The “Calamus” poems, along with the poems of “Children of Adam,” have of course long been considered among the most potent, the most deliberately revealing of Whitman’s reveries on sex and sexuality. And while the intensity and variety of male-to-male attachments is certainly on prominent display in “Calamus,” it is nevertheless true that much, if not all, the poems’ palpable flirtatiousness depends upon an erotics of intimation and concealment, of secrecy. Whitman announces his project for “Calamus” in the closing lines of a poem later named “In Paths Untrodden,” the section’s opening lyric:

I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young men,
To tell the secret of my nights and days,
To celebrate the need of comrades.²⁵

“Calamus” thus begins by positing a secret so scandalous or indecorous or exciting that it must be withheld. Yet the following line suggests a possible content, “the need of comrades,” which is itself so exorbitantly inexplicit that we can only read it as an oblique intimation of some content inexpressibly more numinous and supple. Under the pressure of such suggestion, the details leading up to this moment in the poem (“in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,” for instance) acquire a curious urgency—curious because the secret that so invests them remains to the end unspecified. “Resolved to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,” the poet nevertheless demurs from saying just what it is about that attachment that demands such seclusion and such secrecy. At once perfectly ordinary (common to “all who are, or have ever been, young men”) and somehow scandalous (part of “the life that does not exhibit itself”), “manly attachment” emerges in the poem as a phenomenon about which the reader’s hunger to know something more definitive will necessarily be keen. But rather than satisfy that epistemological craving, Whitman prefers instead to test, by those double movements of occlusion and suggestion, the expressive possibilities of inspecificity and postponed disclosure.

“Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand” is exemplary in this respect. It begins:

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
 Without one thing all will be useless,
 I give you fair warning, before you attempt me further,
 I am not what you supposed, but far different. (*LG-1860*, 344)

The second line, “Without one thing all will be useless,” invites us to follow whatever lead the poet might offer—how difficult can it be, after all, to discover “one thing”?—and every casual warning and leisurely dismissal serves only to incite us, to strengthen our resolve to unearth that one revealing thing. Once again, the poem’s avowed secretiveness fairly electrifies each line with the promise of revelatory disclosure, until at last something of an apotheosis is reached:

But just possibly with you on a high hill—first
 watching lest any person, for miles around, approach unawares,
 Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea, or
 some quiet island,
 Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
 With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss, or the new husband’s
 kiss,
 For I am the new husband, and I am the comrade. (*LG-1860*,
 345)

This passage delivers us to a kind of interpretive crossroads: is the great secret of this poet’s nights and days, then, the fact of his amorous relations with young men—the fact that toward them he is both comrade and husband, friend and lover? Or, instead, is this precisely the question the poem all but requires us to ask, only so that it may then unravel whatever answer we offer? “But these leaves conning,” the poet continues,

you con at peril,
 For these leaves, and me, you will not understand,
 They will elude you at first, and still more afterward—
 I will certainly elude you,
 Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me,
 behold!

Already you see I have escaped from you. (*LG-1860*, 346)

The penultimate line drives home the point once more, though with an extra twist of authorial perversity: “For all is useless with that which you may guess at many times and not hit—that which I hinted at.” Was the new husband’s kiss, then, not a revelation at all but merely a suggestion, a “hint”? Of what? If there are, as the poet implies here, no actual disclosures in the poem, only hints, then the world it conjures for us is one susceptible only to speculation, inference, “guess[es].” It is a world, in other words, that solicits innumerable interpretations by canceling the possibility of there being just one. “For it is not for what I put into it that I have written this book,” the poet tells us, “Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it.” Indeed, what Whitman puts into “Calamus” are deliberate omissions, expurgations that leave us finally with the skeletal outlines of a secret whose indisputably erotic aura is designed both to invite and to resist any and all specifying claims about it.

Among the most curious things about “Whoever You Are” is how intimately its drama of sexual disclosure is tied to the manipulation of certain readerly identifications and dependencies. The relation the poem works so diligently to agitate, after all, is not that of the poet to his many comrades (there is little question that he knows what they are about) but the relationship of the reader—the “you” who seemingly cannot ever know enough—to the knowing poet. For instance, the show of interpretive invulnerability Whitman offers at the end of the poem works also as a particular kind of sollicitation. Proclaiming his remoteness from all common modes of apprehension—and, further, that the details of his poems are but feints and prods, “hints”—Whitman yet holds out the tantalizing possibility of recognizing him by other means. Indeed, the poem clearly advertises the fact that to those capable of such ingenious recognitions, an uncommon intimacy with the poet will be the reward, an ability to walk among the beloved cognoscenti: “Nor will the candidates for my love, (*unless at most a very few,*) prove victorious” (*LG-1860*, 346, my emphasis). Given any reader’s hunger to be so solaced by such an avowedly devious text, the promise of an alternative form of recognition will as a matter of course be set upon with eager determination. How would one possibly resist the invitation to think of oneself as among those “very few” who understand, who belong?

This irresistible provocation helps us begin to explain, among other things, why merely recognizing the hardly occluded fact of the poet’s

erotic attachment to other men can often feel (and has felt for a number of critics for a number of years) like the acquisition of a passport into the “secret” workings of Whitman’s poems, and of Whitman himself.²⁶ The rewards of that recognition—I’ll call it, for the moment, a gay recognition—are difficult to gainsay. First, there is the splendid readiness with which so many of the poems’ details yield themselves to the coherence that recognition provides: secluded locales become cruisy erotic safe havens; inexplicitness becomes practiced solicitation; the very silences of the poems seem flirtatious manipulations of the age-old code of *illum crimen horribile quod nominandum est*. Given such exquisite responsiveness, one can feel deeply confirmed in the sense that each minute detail of “Calamus” has been waiting, all the while, for the touch of just this interpretive wand to bring it to its full significance. Moreover, by thus completing the erotic scene only suggested by the poet, we accomplish a dramatic reversal of the relations of readerly dependency from which we began: no longer mere interpreters, we appear at the origin of meaning, as collaborators in the work of engineering the poems’ revelations. In these ways and in several others, the ability to discern in Whitman’s various oclusions the codes and patterns of a different sort of sexual candor can feel like the surest mark of one’s readerly aptitude, as well as of one’s successful entrée into Whitman’s prismatic poetic world.

It is just as likely, however, that this sensation of having found one’s way in is less a readerly achievement than an effect of the poems’ calculated intimacies. That is, the kind of recognition I’ve sketched above might also be said to function in “Calamus” as a carefully administered antidote to the avowed obscurity of the poet’s intentions, an antidote designed to engender a sense of intimacy with the poet that is only more acute for the anxieties of readerly incapacity it works to soothe. So perfectly does the key of gay recognition unlock the encrypted meanings of the poems that we might well begin to suspect the poet of having offered those oclusions strictly for the purpose of investing our “discoveries” with an added charge of accomplishment. Do we actually discover anything in “Calamus” other than our own capacity to feel accomplished in the act of discovery? How is it, in other words, that in a sequence of poems that so vocally broadcasts the saliency of male-male desire, the mere recognition of that erotics continues to yield such a powerful sense of having been achieved?

Gay recognition is an achievement, of course, when set against the

tradition in Whitman scholarship of subjecting the poet's desire for men (when it is not ignored altogether) to frontal attacks or urbane assaults. Among the latter, the now familiar rejoinders include: "There's no hard evidence that it happened"; "If it happened, it has no bearing on the poetry"; and (the caggiest) "Back then it didn't mean what it means now."²⁷ Most of these approaches are easy to answer. If the playful inexplicitness of much of "Calamus" is the terra firma in which is staked such agnosticism about Whitman and the love that dare not speak its name, we need only remind the unbelieving that Whitman's love for his comrades does speak its name, often in the most indisputably erotic terms. There is, for instance, precious little ambiguity about "City of Orgies" or the gorgeous "When I Heard at the Close of Day," which ends with the poet in bed with "my dear friend, my lover": "And his arm lay lightly around my breast—And that night I was happy" (*LG-1860*, 357–58). Such moments as these are by no means rare in the poems, and they are straightforward enough in the pleasures they display to make the "did he or didn't he" biographical hubbub around Whitman seem, at best, priggish. Against such an unpromising critical backdrop, recognition of the gay content of even these explicit scenes can indeed seem a hard-won victory.

The world of biographical criticism is not, however, the only source of resistance. The "Calamus" poems themselves, by their own complicated workings, do a great deal to trouble the security of an erotic recognition that, by the same motions, they invite. We've seen already how the reiterated secretiveness of "Whoever You Are," while it rewards many aspects of a reading in which the poet's desire for other men simply *is* his secret, nevertheless marks that reading as untenably partial, insufficient. The perfectly straightforward occlusions of that poem ("these leaves, and me, you will not understand") find their analogues in the more delicate maneuvers of encryption and concealment that operate elsewhere in the sequence, and these are worth looking at in some detail.

If the "Calamus" poems unfold according to any one pattern of disclosure, it works something like this: A question or problem is broached ("Mind you the timid models of the rest, the majority?"); that question is dropped or rerouted as the poet avows his greater interest in a particular attachment, the intensity of which more or less directly suggests sexual exchange ("Yet comes one, a Manhattanese, and ever at parting, kisses me lightly on the lips with robust love");

and then there follows a description or summary that neither refutes nor confirms the sexual connotation but, far more pointedly, dilates over its opacity (“We are those two natural and nonchalant persons”) (*LG-1860*, 364).²⁸ Neither a denial nor an avowal of any one sexual recognition results from these maneuvers but, instead, an unrelenting affirmation of the possibility of such recognitions. Again, the conclusion of “When I Heard at the Close of Day” is exemplary for its sexual candor:

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover
in the cool night,
In the stillness, in the autumn moonbeams, his face was inclined
toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—And that night I was
happy. (*LG-1860*, 358)

Though there is nothing one could call unclear about this passage, it has a flicker of deviousness in the phrase “And that night I was happy,” which after so much concrete erotic detail presents itself as almost winkingly nonspecific. Indeed, the more potentially revelatory the scene, the greater the pleasure Whitman seems to take in withdrawing just enough into abstraction to infuse the whole proceeding with the tantalizing shimmer of ambiguity. If a sexually specifying reading feels to the reader like something to be continually and heroically accomplished, it is thus in large part because the poet invests even the frankest of his disclosures with a degree of attenuation so fine, so precisely dosed, as to border on the cunning. (This is what Eve Sedgwick seems to have in mind when she writes of “the play of calculation and haplessness” that constitutes “the erotic surface” of Whitman’s persona.)²⁹ Nothing is foreclosed by these attenuations; rather, they serve to raise the simplest acts of connotative interpretation to the status of an achieved confidence, a hard-won intimacy with a poet whose secrets one comes, by one’s own efforts, to share.

“Calamus” may thus have a secret, but it is one that, from the first, everybody is welcome to know. By deploying the rhetorical mechanisms of secrecy, Whitman simply gives a sweet taste of accomplishment to the reader’s discovery of what was never hidden. To argue that what I have called a gay recognition is thus a *provided* structure in the poems—a lever for their calculated effects of intimacy—is not, however, to say that same-sex attachments are salient for Whitman only

as they orchestrate a drama of reader-author solicitation. But to begin to explore the breadth of meaning these attachments might provide, we need to move past the routinized exercises of “discovery” in which readings of the poems (and of this poet) can so quickly stall.³⁰ If, in other words, it can at this point be little more than self-congratulation to claim to have “discovered” the secret of Whitman’s desire for men, then perhaps we ought to look to the poems’ peculiar forms of emphasis (inexplicitness, occlusion, encryption) for different kinds of revelation. How, for instance, do the poems’ epistemological dislocations give inflection to the notion of attachment itself, under whose conceptual arc all the vexations surrounding sexual definition can be said to occur?

To answer this question cogently, we need to recognize that neither modesty nor shame is a plausible motive for the poet’s occlusions, as is sometimes suggested.³¹ The poet’s inexplicitness with respect to the “manly attachments” he describes does absolutely nothing to chasten their sexual aura, as we have seen; quite to the contrary, it seems in fact to propagate in every poetic detail a potentially homoerotic suggestiveness. Yet the ambiguity Whitman cultivates, while it does not disallow almost any form of sexual recognition, nevertheless builds into the passionate attachments of men to men a resilient irreducibility. No amount of rereading “Calamus” can produce what the poem “Whoever You Are” calls the “one thing” necessary to, as it were, “prove” that the attachments figured in the poem are sexual attachments, that the scenes of affectionate exchange are scenes of sexual exchange; though it is difficult to imagine what that “one thing” would be, it is at any rate explicitly defined in “Calamus” as that which is withheld. What is withheld from us is of course not the ability to recognize the sexual piquancy of any scene of male bonding—such recognition continues to abound—but the ability to name or to classify those bonds, or any bonds, as *simply* affectionate, simply sexual, simply anything. A kind of enforced agnosticism with respect to the taxonomic certainty of any attachment is the most immediate result of the poems’ finely tuned attenuations. If we are excluded here from any one vantage or form of interpretive power, it is thus the power to decide which bonds count as sexual and which do not.

The power to recognize and to name sexuality in the field of human relations—the power of sexual knowledge—would of course by roughly the end of the century come to dominate almost every ritual

of identity, filiation, and truth in Western culture, and to do so with an increasingly terrorizing effect on sexually deviant populations. According to this now familiar sexual calendar, it seems noteworthy, even odd, that Whitman in 1860 should be so concerned with the mechanisms of sexual knowledge.³² (It goes rather strongly against David Reynolds's breezy description of the antebellum state of sexual affairs. "Gender roles," he writes, "were fluid, elastic, shifting in a time when sexual types had not yet solidified.")³³ Yet I am inclined to agree with Michael Warner, who argues in an essay about Thoreau that critics who look too dogmatically "to the late nineteenth century as the period in which sexuality was recodified in Western culture" are liable to overlook the operative codes of sexual definition that had begun to coalesce several generations earlier.³⁴ One such standardized code was particularly important to Whitman, supplying him with both a conceptual framework within which to maneuver and—just as crucially—a lexicon to invade and redeploy. Though it sounds like it might be, the keyword *adhesiveness* is not one of Whitman's neologisms but comes directly from the annals of a science called phrenology.

Although its principal object of study was the human cranium and the various faculties contained in its neatly patterned regions, or zones, phrenology had for several years been preparing the way for the ascension of a particular brand of sexual taxonomy.³⁵ (Nationally renowned "practicing" phrenologists Lorenzo Fowler and Orson Fowler both went on to write, when such things were in vogue, tracts on marriage and sexual health.) The sexological relevance of phrenology is in fact evident in its most basic tenets. For instance, by the phrenological account, "attachment" is a sharply differentiated phenomenon, the origins of which are to be found in the five "affective faculties" of the human brain. Whitman is of course most fond of "adhesiveness," which is the organ responsible, in Lorenzo Fowler's words, for "friendship, attachment, sociability . . . manifested regardless of sex." The other four "affective faculties" are Philoprogenitiveness (the love of children), Inhabitiveness (the love of home), Concentrativeness (which unifies thought and feeling), and Amativeness, which according to Fowler, refers specifically to a reproductive "love between the sexes."³⁶ What is notable about this mapping of the human affective world is, first, how readily the correlation of types of attachment to gendered objects gives way to exactly the typology supposed not to

have solidified for several decades. That is, by sequestering all sexual ties in cross-gender relations (in amativity), phrenological taxonomy accomplishes the assimilation of erotic difference to gender difference that yet defines our modern vocabulary of sexual definition, which psychoanalysis would soon solidify. For by this calculus, the only condition in which a properly sexual attachment can legitimately appear is that of a difference in gender between the two persons involved. Appearing here, well before the term *homosexual* was current in the United States, is a gender-based erotic economy of difference and sameness, *hetero* and *homo*.

Among the things even this loosely formed conceptual economy brings sharply into focus is the pertinence, the utility, of homophobia even in 1860. We notice in the phrenological partitioning of human intimacy into mutually exclusive states of desire and not-desire how remarkably vulnerable virtually everyone becomes (that is, anyone who enjoys any attachments to persons of their own gender) to the charge of having stepped across the invisible but now electric line that differentiates illicit bonds from licit ones—invisible because the very terms by which such a charge could proceed acquire meaning only in relation to a standard of sexual measure that is nowhere specified. Something qualitative must differentiate adhesive and amative attachments, but nothing in the phrenological account tells us what that something might be—only that gender difference is the proper condition of its emergence. What this constitutive uncertainty comes to mean, first, is that enormous reserves of coercive power will belong to anyone who can successfully wield such terms, and second, that such power shall be manifested in an ability to “know” other people and their desires more intimately and authoritatively than they can hope to know themselves.³⁷ By the light of these seizures, the dialectics of secrecy and disclosure in the “Calamus” poems, for all their playfulness, appear quite determined in the resistances they offer. For what the poet labors so painstakingly to neutralize in his readers while parading before us a world of attachments to which we are allowed, finally, no taxonomizing access is exactly the interpretive security in which the invasive, regulatory powers of sexual knowledge are staked. His steadfast refusal to make the poems’ same-sex attachments legible as simply or conclusively sexual, while it does not offer the solace of a valorized homosexual type, nevertheless assiduously frustrates the entire conceptual economy that would make homophobic proscript-

tion such an inordinately powerful coercive tool. Whitman deploys the lexicon of phrenology, then, but in a way that will not yield to the carefully partitioned sexual typology that the phrenological “sciences” intimate.

It is crucial to recognize as well that the poet’s impulse against homophobia is, at the same time, an assertively nationalist impulse, a part of what Whitman himself describes as the “political significance” of the “Calamus” poems. I have said that Whitman’s calculated attenuations unsettle (even as they invite) attempts to read his poems as an anatomy of a homosexual “type,” and on this point I differ most consequentially with Michael Lynch’s powerful account of “adhesiveness,” and of the affordances it provides to Whitman as he attempts to lay the groundwork for a “modern homosexual” identity. Though Lynch’s reading and mine concur about the eagerness with which the poet makes himself and his texts available to be recognized in the grain of their sexual specificity, I nevertheless maintain that the concentration of same-sex desires into a type is anathema to Whitman, insofar as such typology depends entirely upon a cleaving of attachment into clearly defined, diametrically opposed states of desire and not-desire. The homosexual “type,” on this account, would be one whose relations to some of the same sex are, definitively, desiring but also one whose relations to the opposite sex are not-desiring. Or to frame the matter differently, the heterosexual type—the “normal” type—would not be one who desires every person of different gender but one who desires no one of the same gender. What this partitioning threatens to effect, along with a thorough enshrinement of heterosexuality as the proper realm for sexual ties, is a sweeping de-eroticization of social attachments, demoting them to the realm of the patently not-sexual. That is, the phrenological model works to isolate the sexual, to sequester its force and to identify it seamlessly with male-female conubial attachment. Whitman, too, looks to figure an urgent, physical, erotic need—he calls it “the need of comrades”—but his deliberate gestures of occlusion and concealment have the effect of unmooring that passionate intimacy from the constrictive teleologies of heterosexual reproduction that were increasingly taken to define the sexual as such. What results from these attenuations is, again, not a chastening but an extension of the passionate, the physical, the erotic, across the whole range of social ties. Refusing to draw a perimeter around “the sexual,” Whitman instead releases erotic potentialities into every register of social life.³⁸

A certain oddity thus attends the claim that among Whitman's abiding ambitions was his desire to "make sex public."³⁹ It seems much more accurate to say that in Whitman sex is public by definition, since, for him, sociability, or other-directedness, has as its foundation an erotic tie. Genital sexuality is simply at one end of a continuum that for Whitman is not divided according to the presence or absence of an erotic dimension but scaled according to intensities. Sex, in other words, is the engine that drives the human capacity for relation to others, the *primum mobile* of human sociality. So powerful is the force of this almost Deleuzian desire that it may bring persons into bond with each other almost at random,⁴⁰ which is what makes sexuality an ideal language to describe the nature and substance of U.S. nationality. In poems like "Whoever You Are" and "To A Stranger," Whitman underscores what Michael Warner calls the "mutual nonknowledge" of author and reader to argue that sexual desire allows even strangers to share an affective bond, to be intimate with one another.⁴¹ The principal manifestation of such stranger-intimacy in the poems is of course *cruising*—the sexual solicitation of strangers seen most vividly in a poem like "Among the Multitude," where Whitman writes:

Lover and perfect equal!

I meant that you should discover me so, by my faint indirections,
And I, when I meet you, mean to discover you by the like in you.
(LG-1860, 376)

By their mutual anonymity, these lovers exemplify not merely the enviably avaricious quality of American sexual appetites but by their cruising, they perform as well the utopian relation of citizen to citizen—the relation, that is, of nationality. In the world of "Calamus," one can enjoy a passionate bond with people one does not know (people, for instance, such as Walt Whitman). And this anonymous intimacy, extended across the great unpeopled spaces of the continent, is just what Whitman points to when he broaches the word "America."

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Notes

For their contributions to this essay—encouragement, good counsel, and much else besides—I thank Mark Seltzer, Dana Luciano, Celeste Goodridge, and especially Bonnie Blackwell.

- 1 Walt Whitman, "Preface 1876," *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1034; further references to *Poetry and Prose* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *PP*.
- 2 Whitman's long-held dream of becoming a touring orator has been amply documented, as has his career as a printer and journalist (see especially C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in "Leaves of Grass"* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983]; and the "Oratory" section in *Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, Vol. VI: Notes and Index*, ed. Edward F. Grier [New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984]).
- 3 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Penguin, 1959), 43; further references will be to this edition, a reprint of the 1855 edition, and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LG*.
- 4 What often gets described as Whitman's capacity to "infold" his readers is largely an effect of these sudden reductions and expansions of discursive scope. Michael Warner has something of this drama in mind when he writes of the effects of intimacy in Whitman's second-person address, arguing that "'you' is, after all, not you but a pronomial shifter, addressing the in-principle anonymous and indefinite audience of the print public sphere." Warner goes on to suggest that Whitman's anonymous "you" is also not "complacently generic": "[W]hile we remain on notice about our place in nonintimate public discourse, we are nevertheless solicited into an intimate recognition exchange" ("Whitman Drunk," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996], 41). See also Tenny Nathanson's excellent description of Whitman's "presence" and its capacity to "compound the physical and the vaporous" in *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in "Leaves of Grass"* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1992), 3. For a fine elaboration of the idea that "Whitman wishes to disseminate affectionate physical presence from (author) to the (audience), fervently and directly," see Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in "Leaves of Grass"* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 3.
- 5 For more on the antebellum disenchantment with political institutions, and on Whitman's own brand of antistate nationalism, see Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, "'Where is the Real America?': Politics and Popular Consciousness in the Antebellum Era," *American Quarterly* 49 (June 1997): 225–67.
- 6 Benedict Anderson has written eloquently about "that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [New York: Verso, 1983], 40). Whitman, I suggest, tends to conceive such "confidence" in markedly physical, passionate terms. For him, nationality can exist only as a quality of intimacy between persons who, though members of the same nation, are likely unacquainted. The

singular depth and forcefulness of that unlikely bond, as he describes its occurrence in the United States, seems to account for his fervent belief in the exemplarity of American nationality.

- 7 Questions about the nature and consistency of relatedness have seemed difficult to imagine framing without the aid of psychoanalytic models and methodologies. I think especially of Freud's suggestive frustration with the notion of "group ties" and his subsequent ruminations on telepathy, suggestion, and the somewhat mystifying phenomenon of identification (*Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, ed. and trans. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1959]). As Adam Phillips writes of the "critical concept of identification," "[I]t forces us to confront the question that exercised Freud and which object-relations and relational psychoanalysis take for granted: in what sense do we have what we prefer to call relationships with each other? And, perhaps more importantly, how do we go about deciding—or who is in a position to decide—what a relationship is?" (*Terrors and Experts* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995], 77–78). That psychoanalysis might provide a useful conceptual frame for thinking not only about nationality and sex but nationality and race as well, has been suggested to me most powerfully by Hortense J. Spillers's landmark "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (summer 1987): 65–81.
- 8 For an account of Whitman's catalogs and their "agglomerative syntax," see Nathanson, *Whitman's Presence*, 30–56; see also Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 88–165.
- 9 For more on the particularity of Whitman's style, see Hollis, *Language and Style*; and Mark Bauerlein, *Whitman and the American Idiom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1991). F. O. Matthiessen's account of the poet's language remains a touchstone here as well (see *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), 517–625).
- 10 Whitman's is not a typically romantic and therefore perceptual authority. That is, he doesn't strive to transform mere seeing into a quality of action, of seizure; rather, his authority is an utterly impassive mode of receptivity by which he presumes to allow the multifaceted data of the world simply to pass through him with a minimum of resistance or mediation. As Allen Grossman writes, "In (Whitman's) understanding poetry is the leisure of receptivity." Yet that loafing, impassive receptivity is at the same time enlivened by a paradoxically active desire. Whitman impassively receives the various pieces of American experience, and these in turn inflame his desire for further contact and immersion ("The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry toward the Relationship of Art and Policy," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Donald Pease and Walter Benn Michaels [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press,

- 1985], 186); see also Mary Kinzie's trenchant remarks about romantic perception in "The Romance of the Perceptual," *The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 101–46.
- 11 For more on the dialectic in Whitman's poetry between embodied particularity and general availability, read in the context of "the opposition between particular and special interest and general representativeness that was the premiere concern of American politics in Whitman's time," see Mitchell Breitwieser, "Who Speaks in Whitman's Poems?" in *The American Renaissance: New Dimensions*, ed. Harry R. Gavin and Peter C. Carafiol (Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1983), 121, 121–34; see also Wai Chee Dimock's excellent account of the conflict in Whitman "between the opposing claims of universality and particularity in the definition of personhood" (*Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1996], 113–20). Useful here as well is Robert Pinsky's acute description of Whitman's rhythm of whispered description and shouted list in his *Poetry and the World* (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 41–44.
 - 12 *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence, Vol. II*, ed. Vivian de So la Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: William Heinemann, 1964), 653. The line Lawrence is satirizing comes from section 48 of "Song of Myself," where Whitman writes: "And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud" (*LG*, 82).
 - 13 In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence chastises Whitman for having mistaken tired old Christian charity for the vastly more noble virtue of sympathy. In doing so, Lawrence suggests, Whitman forces the soul into improbable attachments and thereby falsifies its instinctual inclinations. And what are those inclinations? Lawrence ventriloquizes the soul thus: "'Look at that prostitute! Her nature has turned evil under her mental lust for prostitution. . . . She likes to make men lose their souls. If she tried to make me lose my soul, I would kill her. I wish she may die.'" Whitman's sympathy, by this account, falsifies the elemental misogyny of the soul, whose phallic defensiveness Lawrence fairly shudders to see compromised (New York: Penguin, 1964), 184. An excellent reading of Lawrence's response to Whitman appears in Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 201–15. For a fuller account of Whitman and the relation of his work to women, see Sherry Ceniza, *Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1998).
 - 14 On the unearned appropriations of Whitman's sympathetic stances in the context of antebellum expansionism, see David Simpson, "Destiny Made Manifest: The Styles of Whitman's Poetry," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 177–96. For a recent ac-

- count of Whitman's nationalism that counters Simpson's, see Charles Altieri, "Spectacular Antispectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and His Heirs," *American Literary History* 11 (spring 1999): 34–62.
- 15 Such Manichean pairings are not difficult to find in historicist criticism of Whitman. It seems by now something of a rule that the poet shall be considered either a genius made distressingly human by his supremacist advocacy of "the racialist theory," as in Alan Trachtenberg's account, or (far more commonly) a democratic prophet and revolutionary who boldly "celebrated the liberation of male and female, sex and the body, workers and poor persons, immigrants and slaves," as Betsy Erkkila contends (Trachtenberg, "The Politics of Labor and the Poet's Work: A Reading of 'A Song for Occupations,'" in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom [Iowa City: Iowa Univ. Press], 131, 120–32; Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989], 7). Accounts that take in hand the poet's stances and gestures, though illuminating in many important ways, also seem distressingly lacking in the ability to describe the differences between one achieved gesture and any other. Thus, for Martin Klammer, the passage from "Song of Myself" in which Whitman claims, "I am the hounded slave"—a passage whose striking rhetorical laxity I am about to discuss—reads as an unbroken extension of the much more poised and differently calibrated passage concerning the runaway slave. In the face of criticism of Whitman's gesture of sympathy (Lawrence's, in fact), Martin Klammer turns not to nuances of the verse itself but to "recent scholarship on slave narratives," which in his estimation, show clearly that "Whitman's imaginative entry into the runaway slave's life may well be the most compassionate response possible." Nothing of the unevenness in Whitman's execution of such gestures is allowed to come into meaning (*Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass"* [University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1995], 134). For a scrupulous account of the reverent valorization of Whitman in recent scholarship, see William Vance, "What They're Saying about Whitman," *Raritan* 16 (spring 1997): 127–49.
- 16 Vivian R. Pollack's description of Whitman's "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" is exemplary in this respect: "In naturalizing an African-born, female figure's sexual and racial subservience, Whitman reverts, appropriately enough, to the traditional, full end-rhyme closure, internal rhyme, and stanzaic regularity of his pre-*Leaves* verse. The poem stands out formally and representationally as a retreat from a more egalitarian social vision" ("'In Loftiest Spheres': Whitman's Visionary Feminism," in *Breaking Bounds*, 96). Pollack's assumption is that forms, not rhetorical maneuvers within them, communicate transparent ideological positions.
- 17 Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 39.
- 18 Leo Bersani is describing Joyce, whose powers of realist character evocation are often slighted or ignored in the rush to anatomize his "fancy

- narrative techniques" (*The Culture of Redemption* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990], 157).
- 19 Dimock, who reads this passage similarly as "one of the most compelling moments of democratic affections in 'Song of Myself,'" offers an especially fine account of Whitman's manipulation of temporality—in particular, of memory—in the stanza (*Residues of Justice*, 117–19).
- 20 "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp" comes from Longfellow's 1842 volume *Poems on Slavery*, in vol. 1 of *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1880), 174.
- 21 The only moment the enunciating voice adopts some of Whitman's particularity—in the phrase "my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin"—is chastened by virtue of being bookended by two of the most confected lines in the stanza: "I clutch the rails of the fence" and "I fall on the weeds and stones."
- 22 [Whitman], *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 6 May 1858; quoted in *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the "Brooklyn Daily Times,"* ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1932), 90.
- 23 For more on racial nationalism and the various meanings of whiteness within it, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of White Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 158–86; on antebellum racial politics and Whitman's Free-Soil partisanship, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 78–79, 208–10, and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 152–54; on Whitman and the project of "ethnology," see Dana Phillips, "Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought and Whitman's 'Democratic Ethnology of the Future,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49 (December 1994): 289–320.
- 24 Klammer notes, "As stunning as Whitman's representations of African Americans may be in *Leaves of Grass*, no less remarkable is his almost immediate retreat from these new and radical claims in the years following" (*Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of "Leaves of Grass,"* 159).
- 25 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), 342; further references to this source will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *LG-1860*. For clarity, hereafter I will refer to many of these poems not by number, as they are identified in the 1860 text, but by the titles later attached to them.
- 26 A vivid example is Malcolm Cowley's account of the poet in an article called, aptly enough, "Walt Whitman: The Secret." Having discovered (mostly from journals) Whitman's desire for other men, Cowley confesses that he finds it impossible not to feel toward the poet "almost as Proust's narrator felt toward the Baron de Charlus, when he saw him crossing a courtyard where the Baron thought he was unobserved. 'I could not help

thinking how angry M. de Charlus would have been,' the narrator said, 'could he have known that he was being watched'" (*New Republic*, 8 April 1946, 482). Cowley here imagines himself to have acquired a knowledge the poet could never have intended for him to have. His embarrassment before the anger he might instill in the poet is second only to his (and to Proust's) self-congratulation for having been so penetrating.

- 27 Genealogies of this tradition appear in Betsy Erkkila's "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic," in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1994), 153-71; Robert K. Martin's introduction to *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life after the Life*, ed. Martin (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1992), xi-xxiii; Erkkila and Grossman's introductory and concluding essays in *Breaking Bounds*, 3-20, 251-64; and Jay Grossman's "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen," *American Literature* 70 (December 1998): 799-832. The most prominent recent example of urbane reading can be found in David Reynolds's award-winning *Walt Whitman: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), in which Reynolds offers the strikingly noncommittal claim (to which I will presently return) that "In the free, easy social atmosphere of pre-Civil War America, overt displays of affection between people of the same sex were common. Women hugged, kissed, slept with, and proclaimed love for other women. Men did the same with other men" (198). The unspecified contrast to today leaves us wondering exactly what this commonness confirms: That such attachments were differently meaningful than they are today, or simply less so? If different, how? Reynolds allows that a different kind of significance might invest these "common" activities, but his desexing, domesticating gestures seem pointedly to insist that we not imagine that significance as in any way continuous with what we would now call homosexuality. For a vehement dissent from Reynolds's account, see Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 89-92.
- 28 The examples are taken from the poem later entitled "Behold This Swarthy Face" (*LG-1860*, 364).
- 29 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 202.
- 30 The exercises I have in mind are those in which we discover that Whitman's great secret is, after all, his desire for men; that Whitman's homoerotic attachments need to be rescued from the guardians of the canon who want only to expurgate them; that by his secret codes (which *we* have cracked) the poet means to outfox and finally redeem a repressive nation. Each of these readings, though surely at one time or another invaluable, seems to me by now to have been fairly exhausted and to offer little new insight into the complexity of Whitman's corpus. If the concern is that Whitman's desires will be denied or belittled by the still quite healthy ranks of dismissive biographers and critics, then we would probably do

- well to describe those desires not at their most formulaic (roughly: homosexuality equals liberation equals U.S. utopia) but as they operate less neatly and transparently, in resistance to such pat equivalencies.
- 31 This is an especially prominent element in, for instance, David Kuebrich's account of "Calamus," in his *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989).
- 32 See, inevitably, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978).
- 33 Reynolds, *Walt Whitman: A Cultural Biography*, 199.
- 34 Michael Warner, "Thoreau's Bottom," *Raritan* 11 (winter 1992): 54.
- 35 By far the most nuanced and informative account of Whitman, phrenology, and its relation to sexuality is Michael Lynch's "'Here is Adhesiveness': From Friendship to Homosexuality," *Victorian Studies* 29 (autumn 1985): 67-96. Other sources that discuss the poet's relation to phrenology are Madeline B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1971); Erkkila, "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic," 153-71; and Reynolds, *Walt Whitman: A Cultural Biography*, 395-98.
- 36 Lorenzo Fowler, *Marriage: Its History and Ceremonies; with a Phrenological and Physiological Exposition of the Functions and Qualifications for Happy Marriages* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1847), 76, 98. The range of phrenological tracts that produce exactly these lists of faculties and attributes is unmanageably vast. A few of the titles most relevant to Whitman include the following: Orson S. Fowler, *Fowler's Practical Phrenology* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1856); Fowler derived much of his text from George Combe, *A System of Phrenology* (New York: William H. Coyer, 1846), which itself synthesized J. G. Spurzheim's *Phrenology, or the Doctrine of Mental Phenomena* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, and Lyon, 1833). For a detailed account of the developmental history of phrenology, see Lynch, "'Here is Adhesiveness.'" It is of course worth recalling that Whitman had his head "read" by Lorenzo Fowler in 1849, and that Lorenzo and Orson Fowler, along with Samuel Wells, distributed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and published the second.
- 37 I borrow a great many terms from Eve Sedgwick's seminal description of homophobia as "a mechanism for regulating the behavior of the many by the specific oppression of a few" (*Between Men*, 88). Explaining the interpretive slippage that gives to homophobic accusation and attack its broadly regulatory power, Sedgwick writes of a patriarchal dispensation in which intense bonds between men are simultaneously mandatory and reprobated. The fallout, she argues, is an endemic and tremendously manipulable state of uncertain or inadequate self-perception; in short, of panic: "Not only must homosexual men be unable to ascertain whether they are to be the objects of 'random' homophobic violence, but no man must be able to ascertain that he is not (that his bonds are not) homo-

sexual. In this way, a relatively small exertion of physical or legal compulsion potentially rules great reaches of behavior and filiation," Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 88–89.

- 38 See Lynch, "‘Here is Adhesiveness’" (88–96). For more on Whitman and the fashioning of a homosexual identity or type, see Robert K. Martin's pioneering *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1979). For a critical response to Lynch, which disagrees with Martin to somewhat different purposes than my own, see Betsy Erkkila's "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic."
- 39 The phrase "Whitman wants to make sex public" comes from Michael Warner's "Whitman Drunk," 40.
- 40 The profound power Whitman attributes to sexuality goes a long way toward explaining his attraction to sexual sciences, such as those found in the male purity movement, whose aims seem so sharply contrary to his own. Anti-onanist writers such as Sylvester Graham, though they demonize sexuality tirelessly, nevertheless present it as a potentially world-altering force, powerful enough to bring civilization itself to its knees. The attractiveness of these authors to Whitman thus seems to lie not in their proscriptions but in their presumption, which Whitman is keen to elaborate upon as well, that sex is a power that makes and unmakes worlds (see Sylvester Graham, *A Lecture to Young Men* [Providence, R.I.: Weedon and Cory, 1834]; and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980]). On the uses of a variety of medical paradigms and discourses later in Whitman's career (following the Civil War), see Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1997).
- 41 Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 39.