

Whitman and Race (“He’s Queer, He’s Unclear, Get Used to It”)

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Dear Friend, let me warn you somewhat about myself – & yourself also. You must not construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W.W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W.W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy of such devotion. Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, 1872¹

Whitman’s insistence on “absorbing his country,” and his extraordinary success in translating his social context into poetry, has produced a rich tradition of biographical and historical criticism,² a tradition rejuvenated in recent years by the popularity of cultural studies.³ Indeed, Ed Folsom, the editor of *The Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, notes in the introduction to his own cultural study of Whitman’s work, a “critical consensus” that “Whitman is best understood contextually, as a writer who reabsorbed many aspects of his culture into his work, a writer we best read by moving from the poetry out into the world that the work was woven from, a writer best understood in juxtaposition to just about any aspect of the culture we can name” (*Native Representations*, ix). This tradition of scholarship is rich because it is, of course, broadly right in asserting a

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¹ From a note written by Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist in response to a letter offering to move from England to America and bear his child (*Correspondence*, 170).

² There are too many to list fully, but certainly Allen’s *Solitary Singer*, Asselineau’s *Evolution of Walt Whitman*, Stovall’s *Foreground*, and Zweig’s *Walt Whitman* are classics, for example, and Kreig’s *Chronology* is extraordinarily useful. In writing this article, however the insightful comments of Andrea Dimino and Miriam Wallace, my colleagues at New College of Florida, and, as always, of my wife, Uma Outka, were as useful as anything I read on Whitman. I am grateful to them for whatever is worthwhile in the article.

³ A representative sample might include Kaplan for an early example, Aspiz’s *Body Beautiful*, Folsom’s *Native Representations*, Reynolds’s *Walt Whitman’s America and Beneath the American Renaissance* (esp. 92–112, 309–34, 507–23), Erkkila’s *Political Poet*, and both the Martin and Erkkila collections for more recent versions.

fundamentally important, even constitutive, link between Whitman's poetry and the surrounding culture. One of the things that makes Whitman such a remarkable and innovative poet was his democratic openness to the myriad voices, desires, inventions, etc. of his time. In insisting on an historicized and political Whitman, we avoid both the breathy enthusiasm of disciples like Gilchrist, and the "apparent split between the politician and the poet" that Erkkila connects to a "Modernist and New Critical" attempt to "rescue Whitman's poems from the charge of political contingency in order to save them for the universality of art" (*Political Poet*, 6). As M. Wynn Thomas notes sharply:

There has been, and I hope there will always be, a fertile quarrel in Whitman criticism between those who seek, by various means, to historicize him and those who are inspired, by his poetic presence, to leap out of place and beyond time and soar into the never-never land of forever. Those of the latter inclination used to be expert at a move that involved elevating Whitman the poet above history, while leaving his alter ego, Whitman the journalist, firmly embedded in his period, regrettably timebound and embarrassingly dated. (133)

And yet Whitman's note to Anne Gilchrist, warning her of a sharp difference between his "actual," "plain personage" and the ideal figure of his poetry, remains a challenge not only to over-enthusiastic devotees, but to modern cultural critics of Whitman as well. The difficulty with the breadth of Folsom's assertion that Whitman is "best understood in juxtaposition to just about any aspect of the culture we can name," is the inert parallelism it permits in the hands of critics less talented than Folsom, the sort of low-energy cultural studies that takes some cultural artifact or text, "finds" it in Whitman's poetry, and then moves onto the next artifact without much comment or demonstration of what new insight into the poetry the relationship provides. Whitman may have, for example, incorporated or troped on anti-masturbation discourses in his poetry, but that fact, while interesting in itself, does not tell us much about the important distinction between amusing nineteenth-century prudery and Whitman's poetic achievement. Poetry, of course, is not merely – or rather, simply – encoded historical information, and the "facts" of history can too easily become a reductive tool, explaining away the potent uncertainty of Whitman's verse. What is so impressive, even mysterious, about Whitman's poetry is the way it transforms ordinary materials, not the mere fact that it uses them. Juxtaposing cultural and poetic texts can slide into an assertion of basic identity between them, a search for similarity between the poetry and other discourses that may miss centrally important differences.

Nowhere is the difference between the historical and poetic Whitman more marked than in his immensely complicated, contradictory, and often unhappy relation to slavery and racism.⁴ Put simply, for many readers and critics, including me, the explicitly racist (if altogether conventional) attitudes that pervade much of his journalism seem deeply at odds with the egalitarian spirit of his poetry generally and the deeply sympathetic and admiring verse portraits of African Americans he creates.⁵ As a journalist, citizen, a garrulous old man rambling to Traubel, Whitman is, to modern ears, usually offensive. He refused, for example, to support abolition before the war, preferring the more “moderate” “anti-extentionalist” and Free-Soil position that saw the expansion of slavery as a threat to the white race and white labor, demanding in the 1856 tract “The Eighteenth Presidency!”: “Shall no one among you dare open his mouth to say he is opposed to slavery, as a man should be, on account of the whites, and wants it abolished for their sake?” (1321).⁶ He confirms his position in an 1858 piece in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* supporting the proposed exclusion of African Americans from Oregon, warning: “It will be a conflict between the totality of White Labor, on the one side, and, on the other, the interference and competition of Black Labor, or of bringing in colored persons on any terms ... Who believes that White and Black 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?” (*I Sit and Look Out*, 90). If anything, Whitman’s racism deepened after the war as he aged. It is painful, for example, to read the following in a late essay opposing African American suffrage: “As if we had not strained the voting and digestive calibre of American

⁴ I am, of course, hardly the first critic to note this tendency in recent cultural studies. Vance’s piece, for example is joyfully cranky – and quite insightful – on this issue in recent Whitman criticism. And I am certainly not the first Whitman critic to argue that his poetic persona should not be conflated with the “real” Whitman – that separation was made, indeed, by Whitman himself when he substituted an anonymous working-class portrait of himself for his name on the title page of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. My focus here is narrower – on the marked difference between the progressive racial attitudes he offers in his poetry and the quite conventional racism he expresses in his journalism and personal remarks, and the interpretive and theoretical problems that split poses.

⁵ While this article will focus particularly on Whitman’s often racist attitudes toward African Americans, there were, of course, other versions of racism in nineteenth-century America, particularly directed against Native peoples. For more on Whitman’s general neglect of Indians in his poetry, see Folsom’s *Native Representations* (55–98) and Kenney’s essay in the Martin collection.

⁶ Here and elsewhere, except where noted, Whitman quotations are taken from *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, edited by Kaplan.

Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons" (*Prose Works*, 762). Whitman (*Whitman!*) even finds the physical appearance of African Americans difficult to admire. Here he is, for example, in *November Boughs*, offering a patronizing description of black Union soldiers receiving their pay:

Here comes the first Company (B), some 82 men, all blacks. Certes we cannot find fault with the crowd – Negroes though they be. They are manly enough, bright enough, look as if they had the soldier-stuff in them, look hardy, patient, many of them real handsome young fellows. The paying, I say, has begun. The men are march'd up in close proximity. The clerk calls off name after name, and each walks up, receives his money, and passes along out of the way. It is a real study, both to see them come close, and to see them pass away, stand counting their cash – (nearly all of this company get ten dollars and three cents each.) The clerk calls George Washington. That distinguish'd personage steps from the ranks, in the shape of a very black man, good sized and shaped, and aged about 30, with a military mustache; he takes his "ten three," and goes off evidently well pleas'd. (There are about a dozen Washingtons in the company. Let us hope they will do honor to the name.) [...]

Now another company. These get \$5.36 each. The men look well. They, too, have great names; besides the Washingtons aforesaid, John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Calhoun, James Madison, Alfred Tennyson, John Brown, Benj. G. Tucker, Horace Greeley, etc. The men step off aside, count their money with a pleas'd, half-puzzled look. Occasionally, but not often, there are some thoroughly African physiognomies, very black in color, large, protruding lips, low forehead, etc. But I have to say that I do not see one utterly revolting face. [...]

These then are the black troops, – or the beginning of them. Well, no one can see them, even under these circumstances – their military career in its novitiate – without feeling well pleas'd with them. (1182–83)

Compare Whitman's tone here with his usual veneration of white Union and Confederate soldiers. He describes General Sheridan's cavalry for example as "a strong, attractive sight; the men were mostly young, (a few middle-aged,) superb-looking fellows, brown, spare, keen, with well-worn clothing, many with pieces of water-proof cloth around their shoulders, hanging down. They dash'd along pretty fast, in wide close ranks, all spatter'd with mud; no holiday soldiers; brigade after brigade. I could have watched for a week" (769). And even when the white soldiers are not "superb-looking" he still desires greater intimacy with them, in sharp contrast to the amused and distant observation he offers of the "black troops":

The streets, the public buildings and grounds of Washington, still swarm with soldiers from Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, and all the Western States. I am continually meeting and talking with them. They often speak to me first, and always show great sociability, and glad to have a good interchange of chat. These Western soldiers are more slow in their movements, and in their intellectual quality also; have no extreme alertness. They are larger in size, have a more serious physiognomy, are continually looking at you as they pass in the street. They are largely animal, and handsomely so. During the war I have been at times with the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Seventeenth, and Twentieth Corps. I always feel drawn toward the men, and like their personal contact when we are crowded close together, as frequently these days in the street-cars.⁷ (770)

There was nothing extraordinary about the racism Whitman expresses in these prose passages – indeed his views were, sadly, quite conventional among most white people of his day (although certainly Emerson, Thoreau, and many others adopted a far more admirable abolitionism).⁸ My point in citing all these unfortunate statements by Whitman is not to upbraid him for his benighted opinions, nor to “correct” others for being moved, nevertheless, by the poetry’s embrace of democracy and freedom, but to underscore how sharply different the prose voice sounds from the egalitarian spirit that suffuses Whitman’s verse.

The same man who called African Americans “baboons” was one of Sojourner Truth’s favorite poets. When Truth first heard Whitman’s poetry read aloud she distinguished immediately between the biographical Whitman and his poetic voice. She first asked for the name of the poet, but then exclaimed, “Never mind the man’s name – it was God who

⁷ Phillips, conversely, argues that Whitman saw white Southerners as themselves a different race and described them in similar terms (at least on one occasion) as the African American soldiers:

This implicit equation, at some level, of the Colored Troops and the Tennessee volunteers suggests that Whitman expected the latter to be not just different from Northerners, and thus from himself, but nearly as different as were the Colored Troops – that is, expected Southerners to be physically and even racially different because he assumed that racial and national or cultural identity were the same things – and Southerners had recently declared themselves a separate nation, after all. (306)

It seems to me that Whitman just used the word “race” to refer to different things – to differences in culture, region, nationality, as well as the more conventional meaning. Certainly Whitman’s attitude toward the white Southern soldiers is infused with eroticism and admiration in a way markedly different from the patronizing and distant tone he adopts when looking at the black “George Washingtons.”

⁸ As Reynolds notes, in 1847, while 2/3 of Northerners disapproved of slavery, only 5 percent of them approved of abolition, fearing the very “amalgamation” Whitman notes in his 1858 *Brooklyn Daily Times* piece cited above (*Walt Whitman’s America*, 118).

wrote it, he chose the man – to give his message,” and was a lifelong fan of Whitman’s verse from that point.⁹ Indeed, George Hutchinson claims that “probably no white American poet has had a greater impact upon black American literature than Walt Whitman” (“Whitman and the Black Poet,” 46), and details his profound influence on the Harlem Renaissance and his enthusiastic and explicit embrace by a range of later African American writers, including Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and June Jordan.¹⁰

The racial split between the freedom-loving “ideal Figure” and the racist “very plain personage” was, of course, a fault line that ran not only through Whitman’s writing and character, but through antebellum American society itself. Noting this split does not “dehistoricize” Whitman, nor should it be dismissed, as an attempt to “leap out of place and beyond time and soar into the never-never land of forever.” If some earlier critics have used the division as an excuse to soar on the wings of poesy away from history, politics, and the unpleasant truths of Whitman’s racism, the fact remains that a wide variety of sensitive readers have found Whitman’s poetry to be importantly different from the racism in his journalism.

Most recent critical responses have approached the issue of this difference in one of two ways. First, and most commonly, critics influenced by cultural studies tend to resolve the contradiction in favor of the journalism, dismissing the admittedly ambiguous democratic enthusiasm of the poetry in favor of the “real,” “true” – certainly less ambiguous – statements in the journalism. For Hutchinson, for example, the enthusiastic reception of Whitman by African American artists that he notes in such detail, is ultimately inaccurate, the product of their need to legitimate their own work and find a friendly white face in the American literary canon. He calls their reaction into question in the close of his piece on the Harlem Renaissance:

Hence, if we accept the validity of recent readings of Whitman’s texts as fostering a white imperialist self and ideology, complicit with white American hegemony – and I think such readings have merit – then we are left with the paradox that, overall, the effects of his work in the early twentieth century – on African American authors, at least – emphatically contradicted the ideological “message” that recent critics have elucidated. This is as attributable to the interests, needs,

⁹ Quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 148.

¹⁰ See also Hutchinson, “The Whitman Legacy and the Harlem Renaissance.” Langston Hughes was particularly influenced by Whitman’s poetry, as both Rampersad’s article and his invaluable biography of Hughes discuss in some detail.

and imaginations of his readers and the contexts in which they read him as to the ideological ambiguities of his poetry. ... To argue for the pervasive impact of Whitman's legacy on the Harlem Renaissance is not, then, to attempt to "save" Whitman from examinations of his racism or to try to contain racial difference within American sameness – but it is to insist on a "mulatto" aspect of American traditions that coexists with and continually revitalizes their multicultural distinctiveness. And it is to demonstrate the need to go beyond ideological interrogation toward diverse historical investigations of the complex, productive, and often ironic or scandalous interrelations between ostensibly separate "racial"/cultural traditions in the United States. ("The Whitman Legacy and the Harlem Renaissance," 212–13)

Hutchinson's assertion of a "valid" or true ideological or racist subtext that has been revealed in these presumably more probing "recent readings" and that lends a somewhat illusory quality to the admiration other readers have felt for Whitman, finds analogues in Thomas' insistence that Whitman's primary concern with protecting white labor in his journalism should make us read the poetry similarly, Trachtenberg's subsuming the "mitigation" of Whitman's "sympathetic" and "stunning" portraits of slaves under "the unhappy truth about Whitman's theory of race" we find in the journalism (122), and Reynolds' painstaking recording of the cultural, political, and historical data that underlay Whitman's poetry.¹¹

The second common recent critical approach to the "question" of Whitman's views on race accepts the split as fundamental to – even constitutive of – Whitman's poetry. Klammer's book opens, for example, with a detailed discussion of the distinction and argues throughout that the slavery issue was central to Whitman's poetic development, though Klammer backs off from declaring which was the "true" Whitman:

This stunning and radical enunciation of poetic principles from a conventional, workaday, Democratic journalist raises a number of puzzling questions, few of which Whitman scholars have been able to answer satisfactorily. How did Whitman arrive at this poetic aesthetic? How could he contain the disparate beliefs and voices of his "poetic" self and his "journalistic" self? Was the Free

¹¹ Erkkilä's *Whitman the Political Poet* makes the same move in inverse, uniting the political and artistic by focusing on the poetry as the true statement of Whitman's beliefs. While Erkkilä notes Whitman's problematic journalism, her overall attitude is best summed up, I think, when she discusses Whitman's *Brooklyn Daily Times* editorial on the Oregon Constitution quoted earlier – "So far does this vision of an all-white America depart from the egalitarian and racially mixed democratic culture of his songs that it is tempting to believe that the article was not really written by Whitman. But the editorial bears the unmistakable impress of his age's racial views" (150).

Soil journalist the “real” Walt, housed in the flesh of a mortal body and the ideologies of a flawed world, and the egalitarian poet the “ideal” Walt, that transcendent being he longed to become? And how seriously does one attach the language of his rhetorics – either poetry *or* journalism – to what he “really” believed? This study does not claim to unravel such mysteries, but it is possible to move nearer to understanding Whitman’s sources of inspiration, his peculiar focus on slaves, and, ultimately, his emergence as a poet. (52)

Similarly, recent discussions by Kerry Larson, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Allen Grossman, all see Whitman’s poetry as a (largely failed) attempt to hold (if not repress) the political and moral contradictions of slavery and Union that rived both Whitman and the United States in some state of consensus, identity, or union.¹²

What emerges from this admittedly rather crude summary of an extraordinary range of Whitman criticism are three basic positions on the racial division between the journalism and the poetry: (1) The New Critical view that Whitman’s poetry is all that really matters, and his unenlightened political views are so much dross on his genius; (2) the notion that the journalism in fact represents the “real” Whitman, or at least has similar authority to the poetry, and should lead us to reread the poetry in a less politically breathy way; and (3) the idea that the division represents contradictions in both America and Whitman’s own psyche, contradictions that Whitman tried, somewhat desperately, to repress, cover up, or ameliorate by writing great poetry. Despite their apparent contradiction, all these views have merit and have certainly produced a range of interesting, often brilliant, readings of Whitman’s poetry. And yet, none manages to “solve” the fundamental “problem” of how a racist journalist could write such politically inspiring poetry – it won’t do,

¹² Larson’s *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, argues that Whitman’s underlying motive in writing his poetry “involves the evolution of a consensual framework which the poem does not recommend so much as embody. ... By permitting all and rejecting none, the proper business of the poem is not to sustain a drama, develop a cast of characters, mount an argument, explore a soul, plead a cause, or render a judgment; more fundamentally, its ideal aim is to gather together without artificially dichotomizing a host of ‘opposite equals’ in what amounts to a convocation and tallying of their diverse energies.” Sánchez-Eppler’s chapter on Whitman in *Touching Liberty* concludes that “if Whitman’s poetry does absorb the social divisions of antebellum America, and particularly the crisis over slavery, it is also absorbed by it,” and therefore that “the poet, the person whom Whitman imagined as capable of mediating between the social divisions exemplified by American slavery, finally comes to incarnate those divisions” (82). Allen Grossman’s “Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln” observes that “Walt Whitman found his truth, and the unity of his work, precisely at the crisis of contradiction where Lincoln found disintegrative instability.”

finally, to divorce Whitman's poetry from its racist author, nor simply to declare that "in fact" Whitman's poetry is not racially inspiring and the millions of activist readers who have found it so for generations are deluded, nor to see it as a moment when Whitman "in fact" was unable to make peace with a contradiction.

Rather than debating whether Whitman was "really" racist or not, whether the journalism or the poetry contained his "true" views, or how to "solve" the "problem" of their apparent contradiction, I want to avoid such questions of identity and truth, asking not what Whitman believed about race, but what his poetry *does* to it. In doing so I draw on the approach of recent critics who have "queered" similar debates about the precise nature of Whitman's sexual identity.¹³ Instead of trying to determine what Whitman *was* – "in fact" straight, "in fact" gay, "in fact" bisexual/asexual/autoerotic/inactive-but-gay/X mix of the previous/etc. – queer theory focuses more on what Michael Moon calls the "fluidity" of Whitman's sexuality, or what Killingsworth terms Whitman's "physical eloquence," on the way Whitman's sexuality restlessly unsettles *all* categories of sexual identity, merging straight, gay, reader, poet, male, and female. The underlying insight is that Whitman, especially in his poetry, was never particularly engaged by truth, identity, or position, but instead preferred the unsettlement of fixed epistemologies, the imperative "Allons!" of "Song of the Open Road" to any final destination.

Rather than posing a problem for Whitman, a contradiction he tried to repress, it seems to me that his racism in fact provided a poetic possibility, the sort of internalized social taboo shot through with repressed eroticism that the poetic voice loved to work against, indeed a voice that found itself in that work. After all, it is hard to imagine "Walt" not seeing an almost ideal poetic and erotic opportunity (and the two are rarely distinct in Whitman) in *any* "amalgamation" that "Nature" has set an "impassible seal" against. Such illicit amalgamations, indeed, are the very stuff of his

¹³ While I in no way wish to denigrate the trailblazing work of critics like Robert K. Martin in his 1979 *Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, that insisted on the centrality of Whitman's homosexuality to his poetry, at least since the publication of Michael Moon's brilliant *Disseminating Whitman*, and M. Jimmie Killingsworth's deeply engaging *Whitman's Poetry of the Body* the attempt to establish Whitman's sexual identity has often given way to the, to me, more subtle and less essentialist analyses influenced by queer theory. See also Erkkila's "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic" for another worthwhile queer study.

delight. The racist journalist and the progressive poet form not a contradiction or continuum, but a circuit, the binding and release of eroticized political energies. Whitman, the “plain personage” *was* “really” racist, clearly had a personal distaste for black people, was a “responsible,” moderate, Free-Soil Democrat, at least compared to the “ultraism” of the abolitionists. Walt, the “imaginary Ideal figure” of the poetry, had no such doctrines, no considered opinions about this or that issue – while “others argue and discuss,” Walt goes to “bathe and admire [him]self.” But he needs the contrast with the “trippers and askers,” with Whitman the reasonable, racist journalist to make the bath so appealing, naughty, profound. When Whitman sat down to write an editorial, he asked himself: “What is my position on this issue? How can America solve this terrible problem? What is constitutional, just, reasonable?” These are not the same questions that produced the poetry – indeed, one source of the poetry lies in not asking such questions, not seeing race as a *problem* but as an *opportunity* for daring intimacy.

The racially progressive quality of Whitman’s verse does not come from the specific political stance he takes; there is arguably no *explicit* contradiction between the journalism and the poetry. Rather, the difference comes in what I would call the *trajectory* of the poem, its implicit *telos*, the way the poem’s energy surges against the boundaries the reasonable journalist sets for it. It is not the poem’s destination or content, but its direction, its tendency. It is difficult to define moments of change very satisfactorily – one risks murdering to dissect. As Richard Poirer notes in his struggle to discuss a similar transitory energy in Emerson: “How do we experience a ‘transition’? I suggest, tentatively, that it is like catching a glimpse of a thing before it is possible to recognize or name it, the moment just before it can be classified by language and thus become composed or reposed in a human corpus or text” (47). Or as Emerson himself insists: “Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim” (158). In trying to “account” for Whitman’s various racial sentiments, we need to avoid a similar “repose,” need to find ways to talk about Whitman’s “shooting,” and “darting,” his “transitions” rather than his destinations, and we need to avoid the tendency to make the more stable historical data expressed in the journalism the (inert) truth, to avoid the dull risk that the “low energy cultural studies” I noted in this article’s introduction pose to the poetry’s Emersonian power. That power comes in moments where, like the “greatest poet” in the 1855 Preface, Whitman “glows a moment on the

extremest verge,” at the “flash of the moment of parting” (13). The division between the racist journalist and the egalitarian poet provided just such an Emersonian “gulf” or “aim,” an “extreme verge,” a repressive base from which the poetry “darts,” “shoots,” “glows,” from which it “departs.”

Consider a very early (1850) poem “Blood Money,” ostensibly written to express Whitman’s opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law (requiring the federal government to take legal and police measures to return escaped slaves to their masters), in which we hear, I think, the first stirrings of that very restlessness that emerged brilliant and full-blown five years later:¹⁴

“Guilty of the body and the blood of Christ.”

I.

Of olden time, when it came to pass
That the beautiful god, Jesus, should finish his work on earth,
Then went Judas, and sold the divine youth,
And took pay for his body.

Curs’d was the deed, even before the seat of the clutching hand grew dry;
And darkness frown’d upon the seller of the like of God,
Where, as though earth lifted her breast to throw him from her, and heaven
refused him,
He hung in the air, self-slaughter’d.

The cycles, with their long shadows, have stalk’d silently forward,
Since those ancient days – many a pouch enwrapping meanwhile
Its fee, like that paid for the son of Mary.

And still one goes, saying,
“What will ye give me, and I will deliver this man unto you?”
And they make the covenant, and pay the pieces of silver.

II.

Look forth, deliverer,
Look forth, first-born of the dead,
Over the tree-tops of Paradise;
See thyself in yet-continued bonds,

¹⁴ Whitman dated the poem 1843, but the editors of the Library of America edition of Whitman’s poetry state that “[c]ontrary to Whitman’s dating ... probably first published in New York *Tribune*, June 14, 1850” (1359). I quote the poem in its entirety since it remains somewhat obscure.

Toilsome and poor, thou bear'st man's form again,
 Thou art reviled, scourged, put into prison,
 Hunted from the arrogant equality of the rest;
 With staves and swords throng the willing servants of authority,
 Again they surround thee, mad with devilish spite;
 Toward thee stretch the hands of a multitude, like vultures' talons,
 The meanest spit in thy face, they smite thee with their palms;
 Bruised, bloody, and pinion'd is thy body,
 More sorrowful than death is thy soul.

Witness of anguish, brother of slaves,
 Not with thy price closed is the price of thine image:
 And still Iscariot plies his trade. (1131-32)

While this poem was published in response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, its argument proceeds much differently – both more quietly and more radically – from the angry, and morally compromised, invective of tracts like “The Eighteenth Presidency!” The poem’s explicit equation of the slave with Christ, and the slave-catcher (including, presumably the federal government and its agents) with Judas, is too sweeping to be contained as simple poeticized editorializing. The poem surges from the assertion of a *parallel* between Jesus/Judas and the slave/slave-catcher in the first part – a parallel that does not, necessarily, exceed the poem’s limited editorial purpose of opposing the Fugitive Slave Law – to an assertion of *equivalence* in the second that most certainly does exceed the journalism’s limits. We are not asked to see *something* Christic in the slave’s “goodness,” as we are, for example, when Stowe invites us to view Uncle Tom, but to see the slave *as* Jesus himself:

See *thyself* in yet-continued bonds,
 Toilsome and poor, *thou* bear'st man's form again,
Thou art reviled, scourged, put into prison,
 Hunted from the arrogant equality of the rest;
 With staves and swords throng the willing servants of authority,
Again they surround *thee*, mad with devilish spite;
 Toward *thee* stretch the hands of a multitude, like vultures' talons,
 The meanest spit in *thy* face, they smite *thee* with their palms;
 Bruised, bloody, and pinion'd is *thy* body,
 More sorrowful than death is *thy* soul.

Much as Walt, in “Song of Myself,” merges his identity with what he sees, here Jesus looks out from Paradise, and “becomes the man,” “suffers,” “is there.” The Jesus figure is an early prototype of Walt himself, presaging the mature poetic voice of 1855 in the simultaneous

merge of divinity, beauty, and sympathetic identification with the oppressed and marginalized. Judas is “guilty of the body and blood of Christ”; in a fashion characteristic of Whitman’s later poetry, the ultimate sin is described as against the body rather than against the law, the will of God, or some other abstraction. Even the description of Judas’ suicide by hanging seems a particularly appropriate Whitmanian punishment – a banishment from connection with the earth and sky, the opposite of the Christic/Whitmanic merge. What is born as a poem expressing Whitman’s opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law surges against the limitations of its editorial subject – Jesus “amalgamates,” Jesus is, by implicit cultural definition, not to be betrayed and crucified, no matter what the law or the Constitution declares, Jesus is a “beautiful [black] god,” – one presumably *not* possessed of a “thoroughly African physiognomy very black in color, large, protruding lips, low forehead,” or an “utterly revolting face.” The journalist retains “plausible deniability,” never explicitly calling for abolition or equal regard – but the poetry propels the reader in a far more radical direction.¹⁵

It is the propulsion that is politically and morally remarkable, not simply the identification of Jesus with the slave or the concrete political content that we can deduce from it. Five years later, for example, when Whitman supplants the Jesus of “Blood Money” and himself merges with the “hounded slave” in “Song of Myself,” the result is a passage that, despite its violent imagery, does not tell its readers anything they do not already know, does not incite us to activity:

The hounded slave that flags in the face and leans by the fence, blowing and
covered with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck,
The murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave ... I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me ... crack and again crack the marksmen,
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,

¹⁵ A focus on the explicit content of the poem and its immediate political context, at the expense of what I am calling its “trajectory,” leads Klammer to assert that, while the poem may equate Jesus and the slave, it “does so without calling for the larger abolitionists’ agenda, such as emancipation or equality for blacks” (79). At least to my eye, the former would seem to imply the latter.

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. (65)

Whitman's imagery is vivid and arresting, his identification with the slave's suffering is (arguably) sincerely felt – but who doubted that to be hunted, shot, attacked by dogs, beat over the head, was an awful experience? Even the most virulent racist of the time would hardly have argued that African Americans were indifferent to such treatment. The ability to imagine that such an experience would involve awful suffering is not nearly as provocative or politically suggestive as the notion that in that suffering we see the image of Jesus Christ. The image of the hounded slave, conversely, closes in on itself, becomes a change of garments, a powerful snapshot, but not the stuff of Whitman's most stunning poetry. This, then, is not a "queer" moment in Whitman's racial understanding but a stable moment of identification that exemplifies the flow of the poem rather than changing it. Whitman's restless power ceases in the instant of the slave's repose; he becomes the slave, he dies, he moves on to become the dying fireman, the "old artillerist," and so forth. Nothing challenges the reader's epistemological security, our safe separation from the series of identities – "changes of garments" – that Whitman parades (in) before us.¹⁶ And nothing in this passage challenges in content or in spirit the journalism's "reasonable" racism.¹⁷

¹⁶ Similarly, when Whitman assumes a slave's identity in the subsequently cancelled "Black Lucifer" passage in "The Sleepers," we glean the unsurprising, if anguished, information that (a) the slave was both hurt and infuriated when his master sold his family down the river, and that (b) that anger might erupt violently:

Now Lucifer was not dead ... or if he was I am his sorrowful terrible heir;
I have been wronged ... I am oppressed ... I hate him that oppresses me,
I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.
Damn him! How he does defile me,
How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for their blood,
How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat that carries away my
Woman.

Now the vast dusk bulk that is the whale's bulk ... it seems mine,
Warily, sportsman! though I lie so sleepy and sluggish, my tap is death. (113)

My reading of this passage runs counter to arguments presented by Erkkila (*Political Poet*, 123, 127–28), Larson (67–71), Klammer (152–54) and Beach (35–46) who find the passage's identification of African American anger more startling, original, and threatening to racist white America.

¹⁷ For Klammer, conversely, this moment of embodiment and identification represents the pinnacle of Whitman's progressiveness, the "final leap of the sympathetic and

Whitman's poetry of race is, then, at its most interesting and moving not in moments of identification, but rather when an initial "Othering" of the slave obtains, when the "real" racism Whitman offers in his journalism provides the taboo against intimacy that the poetic speaker moves naughtily to violate, when his (and our) contact with the slave is partial, unstable, live, queer, dangerous, desired. Perhaps the most historically explosive example of what I have been calling Whitman's "propulsion" or "trajectory" comes in the seventh section of "I Sing the Body Electric," when Walt takes over the slave auction:

A man's body at auction,
 (For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale,)
 I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this wonder,
 Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it.

...
 In this head the all-baffling brain,
 In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in tendon and
 nerve,
 They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
 Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-
 sized arms and legs,
 And wonders within there yet.

Within there runs blood,
 The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
 There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings,
 aspirations,
 (Do you think they are not there because they are not express'd in parlors
 and lecture-rooms?). (255–56)¹⁸

imaginative self: not merely from observer to participant but from wholly self to wholly other, from object to subject ... the last stage in the speaker's merging with the world, and his final, most radical word in 'Song [of Myself]' about African Americans and slavery ..."(131).

¹⁸ Although this poem first appeared in the 1855 edition, I have chosen to use the post-war version here. Especially in this section, I prefer the later text for several reasons. The earlier text begins, "A slave at auction," rather than "A man's body at auction," thereby stressing the difference between the reader and the slave, not the unifying stress on the body that both the slave and the reader are/possess. The later edition also includes the line "For before the war I often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale," including the reader simultaneously in the metaphoric space of the slave mart and a habitual, sexualized, voyeuristic act.

Up to this point in the poem, Walt's (and the white reader's) gaze has been directed at fairly familiar, fairly sexualized objects: a catalogue of the body and its various fluids, a handsome fireman, an idealized old farmer.¹⁹ Suddenly, this objectification becomes deadly serious and intensely uncomfortable as, with little warning, the safely eroticized gaze we share with Walt veers off into a deeply taboo area. Slaves are not supposed to be (at least explicitly or openly) sex objects – just objects, issues, questions about the possibilities of “amalgamation.”

Walt leaves us to watch anxiously as he mounts the platform and takes over the auction, directing our reluctant gaze to ever more intimate contact with the body of the slave, forcing us to participate in (and eventually, to reconfigure) slavery, rather than to judge it from a safe distance. On the platform, Whitman is in an extremely precarious metaphorical position, on the verge of a sexualized classification and objectification far uglier than even his “objective” editorials ever produced, placing himself at the heart of perhaps the single most horrible, systematic conflation of sexuality, objectification, and commodification in the history of the nation. And yet it is in the midst of this combination, standing in for the slave trader, that the political and moral power of Walt's resistance to the static questions of politics and morality becomes most manifest.²⁰

Walt begins to transform the slave-mart metaphor by deconstructing the slave's body, blurring the fixed borders of the overdetermined and rigidly hierarchical subject positions – slave, reader, auctioneer – that structure the marketplace. Walt's caressing gaze – and through his, our own – immediately “strips” off the slave's skin, and with it, color, the way race signifies visually. The body of the slave is then transformed into an amalgam of different parts: some anatomical – “tendon,” “nerve,” “breast-muscle,” “backbone,” “neck” – and some mental or spiritual attributes – “pluck,” “volition,” “life-lit” eyes – all of which the reader also has. The difference between the (white) reader and the slave is collapsed by Walt's undermining of the slave's definition. In de Manian terms, Walt allegorizes the symbolic body of the slave, insisting that its meaning is not a subject of debate or a political issue, not graspable “by itself,” but that, as he insists elsewhere about his queer sexuality, “the

¹⁹ Klammer's reading of this passage (141–48) stresses how Whitman's celebration of the body in the earlier sections of the poem “becomes the basis for an egalitarian democracy where the slave and the immigrant belong” (141).

²⁰ Erkkila, indeed, notes how “[i]n the guise of the auctioneer, Whitman faces his audience directly, delivering, like Frederick Douglass himself, an oration on the glories of black humanity” (*Political Poet*, 126–27).

vitality of it is altogether in its relations, bearings, significance” (669), that the meaning of the slave and his body is deferred, referring always to other connected parts, to other meanings, to the reader.²¹

The individual body parts do not themselves represent some absolute hermeneutic finish line, a resting place for the understanding. Indeed, my point is that while Whitman sternly draws such lines in his editorials – declaring that “Nature has set an impassable seal” against integration, for example – Walt’s poetic activity almost always involves the undermining of such certainties. He always insists – here about the body parts – that “there are wonders within there yet.” Composing part of the parts is blood, “the same old blood! The same red-running blood!” Whitman here explicitly insists that the reader is fundamentally similar to the slave, that the slave and the reader share the *same* blood, a dynamic (“running”) element of the human body with metaphoric resonance far beyond its physiological purpose.²² Here blood overflows the distinction between the white observer (the reader, the subject) and the black slave (the Other, the object) that forms the basis of slavery, racism, and most other systematically unequal power relations.

After deconstructing the slave’s body, and connecting it to the reader’s own body and context, Walt reconstitutes and reanimates the slave. The heart sexually “swells and jets,” and the libidinous aspects of the personality – the “passions, desires, reachings, aspirations” – appear for the first time. To speak admiringly of an African American man’s “passions” and “desires” was scandalous enough in nineteenth-century white America; but Whitman, scandalous himself, goes further, linking the slave’s passions and aspirations to the (white) reader’s own, just as he linked the slave’s blood to the (white) reader’s.²³ These “passions, desires, reachings, aspirations” invade the reader’s own likely setting – the “parlor” and the “lecture-room,” moving into “our” neighborhood, attending “our” school, coming to dinner, turning America’s worst racist fears into a celebration. The voice from the margin contextualizes the

²¹ See de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight*, 187–228.

²² Sánchez-Eppler finds more disturbing symbolic resonances in this “blood,” noting the way it recalls the whipping and beating common on the plantation as well as the “place where race dwells” (56–57). I find her argument here, and throughout her chapter on Whitman, to be extraordinarily accomplished – our specific differences spring, I think, from a differing overall sense of how anguished Whitman’s relation to race and racism really was.

²³ And, as Killingsworth notes, Whitman is radical here simply in that he “unveils the physical basis for emotions that, in polite society, come to seem disembodied” (Physical Eloquence,” 74).

voices in the center, allying the epistemological hubris of the reader who tries to maintain a safe “objective” distance from the sexual images in the poetry before him with those who place the slaves on the auction block in the first place. Both the contemporary reader and the auctioneer “think they [the “passions”] are not there because they are not express’d in parlors and lecture-rooms,” or in the familiar, concrete, distanced language of polite or academic discourse. And, to a lesser extent, as critics we do the same thing when we conflate Whitman’s journalism with his poetry, when we approach both looking for some stable or inert set of beliefs we can evaluate and judge, when we assume that the social context reveals the “truth” about Whitman that the poetry hides.

But the slave’s passions do not merely invade “our” lecture-rooms and parlors; they propagate into the future and rewrite the past:

This is not only one man, this the father of those who shall be fathers in
their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and
enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring
through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back
through the centuries?). (256)

Rather than turn the slave into a “representative man,” a symbol of some timeless racial truth, however lovely or ugly, Walt refuses to resolve him into a Truth, to come to a conclusion. The slave’s body is multiplied beyond comprehension, making a mockery of efforts to freeze the body in time or space, to label it as merely animate meat for sale on the block, or, indeed, to celebrate it as some glorious icon of racial triumph. Whitman comes to conclusions, Walt does not. Walt takes the auctioneer’s likely bragging about the slave’s reproductive capacity and inflates it wildly, turning it from the promise of more slaves to “the start of populous states and rich republics,” the unimaginable and wonderful “source of countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments.” Walt does not disagree with the auctioneer, quite; rather he takes the common, ugly sales pitch and makes it engender a nation, much as Walt himself wanted to do.

This nation is not another Liberia, however, despite Whitman’s avowed belief that America was for the whites. Walt ends the passage by opening the white racist’s version of Pandora’s Box, making a suggestion

that might well have gotten him beaten or killed if he had made it to the wrong person: “How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring through the centuries? / (Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries?)”²⁴ Whitman here calls into question the whole notion of racial identity that the slave-mart metaphor fundamentally depends upon, putting his poetic finger on one of the most volatile contradictions in our nation’s history: the idea that African blood was at once weakening, inferior, impure, and that it was so potent that a single drop could determine an individual’s entire physical, and metaphysical, identity. Our earlier sexual connection to the slave’s body is writ radically large; our own ancestry is subjected to the unsettling fluidity of the poem’s trajectory. All the poem has taught us about the explosive uncertainty of the slave’s identity again turns on the reader. Who knows who our ancestors slept with? If we do not know who *he* is, then how do we know who we are? The historical facts of sexuality on the plantation, and beyond, powerfully undermine our ability to keep the slave definitionally different. Suddenly we find out that the Other may not be so other, may be our brother, or cousin, or father, that we may be, to some extent, on the block ourselves.

But, while utterly different in tone and “trajectory,” the slave auction still does not *explicitly* contradict anything Whitman wrote in his journalism. Despite the suggestion of miscegenation, it is not clear that those “rich republics” are not to be founded exclusively in Africa, that Whitman does not think, still, that America is “for the Whites,” and that it is “better so,” that Whitman cannot celebrate the slave without stripping away his race.²⁵ Whitman’s racially progressive suggestiveness, his “trajectory”

²⁴ Kuebrich reads these lines a bit differently, emphasizing the presence of new theories of evolution over the radical racial subtext. He notes that Whitman, “by assuming the role of an antebellum slave auctioneer who, in the process of pointing out the beauties and perfection of the human body, makes the practice of selling people even more immoral by reminding his readers that human beings, when viewed from the perspective of modern science, are all the more invaluable for being the end product of eons of evolutionary activity” (133). Along these lines, see also Killingsworth’s *Poetry of the Body*, 9.

²⁵ As Sánchez-Eppler notes:

Whitman proposes to unify a discordant America by creating a poetry that would reconcile bodily differences. The intense bodiliness of the slave at auction thus simultaneously initiates Whitman’s poetic project and poses the major obstacle to its achievement. The auction block initiates Whitman’s poetic project by staging his attempt to negotiate the space between master and slave. It poses the major obstacle to the achievement of this project of poetic reconciliation because, through Whitman’s sense of otherness, he can find no way to heal these divisions that does not dissolve the

here, is not finally more than suggestion. The frustration with Whitman's queerness is its adaptability – his refusal of identity not only allows him to push in moral and political directions that were sharply different from his journalism but it also allows him to maintain those racist positions after the poem ends. What is most powerful about Whitman's racial poetry – the sense of transition and possibility he evokes in a racist context – is also what most limits it. Whitman's political usefulness is mainly to undo, like Shelley's "Mont Blanc," "large codes of Fraud and Woe", *not* to create political consensus or to support a particular cause.

In one sequence, however, in "Song of Myself," Whitman symbolically confronts his use of his internalized racial taboos and, in doing so, for a moment, frees both himself and the slave. The sequence begins with the well-known passage early in "Song of Myself" when the speaker suddenly assumes the persona of a Southern member of the Underground Railroad:

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,

bodies out of which his poetry is made. Despite his exuberant rhetoric of celebration, despite his insistence that in singing the body this poem overcomes all bodily differences, the costs and contradictions inherent in his double goals of merger and embodiment remain visible. So, as auctioneer in "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman gradually [immediately] strips away the slave's skin, dismembering the body in the act of celebrating it, until all that is left is eternal and ubiquitous blood. (56)

Similarly, Larson argues:

It is not simply that, in holding up the pricelessness of this "wonder," he can only deepen the fact of depersonalization by going on to glorify the slave as a eugenic marvel, much in the same way that "a woman's body at auction" is one section later "not only herself [but] the teeming mother of mothers." Here as in many of these pages a kind of abstract instrumentality overtakes the rhetoric itself, transforming the "divine list" of the body into a checklist of exchangeable parts. ... Such inventories, in this case following directly after Whitman's visit to the slave market and eerily recalling the language of the auctioneer, reveal the body to be a supremely alienable possession, displaced everywhere but inhabited by nobody in particular. Like the slave, it retains no distinctive identity of its own beyond the sum of its uses. (156)

While I think neither critic does full justice to the way the poem's erotic and emotional energy surges against the bounds of the journalist's racism, and the importance of that surge for the (unmentioned) reader and his or her sense of the poem's progressive energy, both critiques have force and accuracy, nevertheless.

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 to me at table ... my firelock leaned in the corner.
 (35–36)

Rather than insisting with the journalist, that “America is for the Whites,” that “Nature has set an impassable seal” against the “amalgamat[ion] of White and Black,” and that no one “wishes it to happen” anyway, the poetic speaker actively aids the slave’s recovery and escape, gently – Christically – reassuring him, washing his feet, clothing him, dressing his wounds, displaying a physical tenderness that presages his later maternal/erotic nursing of the (largely white) wounded Civil War casualties. Indeed, Walt lives with the slave a week, sleeping next door to him, sharing his meals, his complete trust of the stranger underscored by the gun he leaves leaning easily in the corner. Despite – or perhaps because of – the peaceful, deliberate tone of the passage, the intimacy between poet and slave represents an extraordinary shift in spirit from the journalism. Their intimacy seems ordinary, even commonplace, building “naturally” from the slave’s initial discovery by the woodpile to bathing, dressing, domesticity, and cohabitation in just ten lines. There is no trace of the cultural prohibitions against white and black friendship and contact, no sense of the personal distaste Charles Eldridge (a friend of the poet and the publisher of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*) noted Whitman felt for black people: “Of the Negro race he had a poor opinion. He said that there was in the constitution of the Negro’s mind an irredeemable trifling or volatile element and that he would never amount to much in the scale of civilization. I never knew him to have a friend among the Negroes while he was in Washington and he never seemed to care for them.”²⁶ Where the journalist draws lines, argues positions, defines differences, the poet overflows, moving with graceful ease toward ever-greater contact with the slave and his taboo black body.

While critics generally stop here to parse the ways Whitman’s treatment of the slave is and is not progressive, they do not, as a rule, connect the portrait to what follows. And yet the daring, difficult quality of Whitman’s intimacy with the runaway, its hidden triumph, is underscored by the twenty-nine bathers passage that comes immediately afterwards, a passage that serves not only as a template for what Moon calls the “‘fluidity,’ substitutability, and indeterminacy of masculine identity and sexuality” (38) in Whitman’s own queer blurring of gender and sexual

²⁶ Quoted in Asselineau, 188.

identities, but also as a structural analogue for Whitman's relation to race:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
 Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly,
 Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
 She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
 Ah, the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
 You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
 The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran from their long
 hair,
 Little streams passed all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passed over their bodies,
 It descended trembling from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies swell to the
 sun ... they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
 They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending
 arch,
 They do not think whom they souse with spray. (36)

Like the woman/gay poet peeking "aft the blinds of the window" at the naked male bathers, trapped "in fact" behind cultural taboos that suppress intimacy and desire, but poetically fantasizing about joining the bathers' merge of identity in a utopian spermatic union, Whitman's historical racism provides the taboo against interracial contact and friendship that the poetry creates itself in breaking. As Moon notes, queering Martin's insistence on a "literally 'sexual' reading" of the passage's final lines,

[L]imiting the determinate grounds for the exchanges which are represented in a passage like this one to specifically sexual ones is inevitably to produce a hermeneutic dead-end in a text which was designed to retain its fluidity and mobility of meaning(s). Various kinds of male-homosexual desires and interactions *are* being represented here, as they are elsewhere in Whitman's writing, and it is important to recognize them as such. But there are also other kinds of highly significant factors represented as being at work in this passage, such as economies of gender ... age ... general sexual epistemology ... and socioeconomic class. (41-42)

To Moon's list I would add race.²⁷ The passage provides a (probably unconscious) glimpse of how Whitman's own racially divided subjectivity in part produced his verse: at once committed "officially" to "natural" segregation and racial hierarchy, and yet clearly longing for a far different, private interracial intimacy, only in the poetry, in a way both beautiful and heartbreaking, could Whitman both "stay stock still in [his] room" and "see them and love[] them." Far from failing to heal the division between "propriety" and freedom, the poetry depends on it, achieving its force not by a too easy choice between the two, but by creating a nearly explicit circuit of repression, desire, and fantasized satisfaction humming between the respectable position inside the house and the utopian beach, between the "responsible" journalist and the man who lives with the runaway slave.

And the establishment of this circuit allows, finally, what the modern, politically concerned reader has been hoping for from Whitman's poetry: a moment when Whitman identifies with, erotically admires, even declares his love for a powerful and autonomous African American, when Whitman merges himself, his poem, and his idealized country with a black man, and does so without seeing him as a deracinated or dying slave. After the twenty-nine bathers passage, Whitman offers three portraits of the laborers he loved so well and whose rights he defended so ardently in his prose, often to the exclusion of any concern for the welfare of slaves. The first two are white:

The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens his knife at the stall
in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and breakdown.
Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil,
Each has his main-sledge ... they are all out ... there is a great heat in the fire.
From the cinder-strewed threshold I follow their movements,
The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms,
Overhand the hammers roll – overhand so slow – overhand so sure,
They do not hasten, each man hits in his place. (36–37)

Such portraits of the "hunky workmen" Thom Gunn notes Whitman particularly admired, are scattered through the poetry and, one imagines,

²⁷ Moon might partly disagree. He argues that the runaway slave and other African American figures are "included in the text but effectively excluded from its 'fluid' dynamics; like many of its female figures, they are represented as being disseminated not instantly (so to speak), through the central 'fluid' and specular transactions carried out through the text, but only gradually" (82). I would argue, indeed, that the poetry's "trajectory" depends on this "gradual dissemination," on the preexisting racial separation against which the poetry pushes.

throughout Whitman's sexual imagination (210). The third portrait is, however, unique in Whitman's verse, his only celebration of free black labor:

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses ... the block swags
 underneath on its tied-over chain,
 The negro that drives the huge dray of the stoneyard ... steady and tall he
 stands poised on one leg on the stringpiece,
 His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his
 hipband,
 His glance is calm and commanding ... he tosses the slouch of his hat away
 from his forehead,
 The sun falls on his crispy hair and moustache ... falls on the black of his
 polish'd and perfect limbs.
 I behold the picturesque giant and love him ... (37)

Gone is the journalist's claim of an essential "conflict between the totality of White Labor, on the one side, and, on the other, the interference and competition of Black Labor, or of bringing in colored persons on any terms." The portrait of the black drayman represents the final stage of a trajectory that started with the initial tender intimacy the poetic voice showed the "limpsey and weak" runaway slave and then passed through the circuit of confession, desire, and fantasized sexual release implicit in the twenty-nine bathers passage. Here the slave reemerges, "recuperated and passed north," a beautiful free black laborer, presented on equal terms with the two portraits of white labor that precede it. Whitman looks at the drayman with the same momentarily freed erotic gaze that the female "twenty-ninth" bather has when she imagines joining the young men – "she saw them and loved them" turns a few lines later into "I behold the picturesque giant and love him." Her love for the young men, that became also a vehicle for Whitman's gay desire, here overflows again, becoming Whitman's explicit declaration of love for a black man.

Moreover, the description of the drayman matches almost exactly the self-portrait Whitman included on the frontispiece of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as a substitute for his own name. Whitman is not merely "changing his garment" here, projecting himself into the not-difficult-to-imagine suffering of the "hounded slave," or stripping the man's skin from him to uncover the "same red-running blood," but seeing an African American in the same garb, physical appearance, and "calm and commanding glance" that Whitman celebrates in himself. The only difference is the explicitly noted skin color – this Whitman's "polished and perfect limbs" are "black." In this triumphant, momentary, and complete transcendence of the journalist's careful racism, Whitman fulfills

the promise of the twenty-ninth bather's fantasy, breaks the sexualized taboo against racial amalgamation. The poet becomes black, the runaway slave does not die but escapes north to become the very image of the American bard. For one moment, at least, the circuit sparks, the poetry rewrites its author, and Whitman escapes his moment, becomes, in fact, that "imaginary ideal Figure."

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