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A POLITICAL COMPANION TO Walt Whitman

Edited by John E. Seery

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Series Foreword

THOSE WHO UNDERTAKE A study of American political thought must attend to the great theorists, philosophers, and essayists. But such a study is incomplete, however, if it neglects American literature, one of the greatest repositories of the nation's political thought and teachings.

America's literature is distinctive because it is, above all, intended for a democratic citizenry. In contrast to eras when an author would aim to inform or influence a select aristocratic audience, in democratic times, public influence and education must resonate with a more expansive, less leisured, and diverse audience to be effective. The great works of America's literary tradition are the natural locus of democratic political teaching. Invoking the interest and attention of citizens through the pleasures afforded by the literary form, many of America's great thinkers sought to forge a democratic public philosophy with subtle and often challenging teachings that unfolded in narrative, plot, and character development. Perhaps more than any other nation's literary tradition, American literature is ineluctably political—shaped by democracy as much as it has in turn shaped democracy.

The Political Companions to Great American Authors series highlights the teachings of the great authors in America's literary and belletristic tradition. An astute political interpretation of America's literary tradition requires careful, patient, and attentive readers who approach the text with a view to understanding its underlying messages about citizenship and democracy. Essayists in this series approach the classic texts not with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" but with the curiosity of fellow citizens who believe that the

Yes, my dears, they can. Whitman and Baudelaire could have told us! As a matter of fact, they did tell us. In the words of “Janet, Queen of the Bunny Planet,”⁵ *They were there all along*. They urged us to place our faith in the city. They offered us a vision of the city street that can embrace us all, can come through whatever troubles open sexuality may open up, and can make all of us out there feel we are *more alive*.

Notes

1. *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), #95, 275f; 97f.

2. *Spleen de Paris* (1868), trans. Edward Kaplan as *The Parisian Prowler* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), #12, 21f.

3. “That Individual,” in *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (1956; New York: Plume, 1975), 94–100.

4. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961). I discuss Jacobs extensively in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988).

5. *Voyage to the Bunny Planet*, by Rosemary Wells, 3 vols. (New York: Dial, 1992). *Voyage* is one of the all-time great children’s books, in the vein of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. Available at all children’s bookstores, it is a remarkable cure for many modes of adult melancholy.

CHAPTER 7

Promiscuous Citizenship

Jason Frank

The city’s eroticism . . . derives from the aesthetics of its natural being.
—Roland Barthes, “Semiology and the Urban”

Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?
—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

SHORTLY AFTER PUBLISHING THE first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman wrote several anonymous reviews of his own work. These self-reviews offer important insight into the expressly political motivations or “firstmost purports” animating this most innovative and formally unprecedented of nineteenth-century American literary experiments, particularly when read alongside the preface to the first edition of *Leaves*—a remarkable reflection on aesthetic democracy whose core insights would later be elaborated in “Democratic Vistas” (1871). Whitman’s anonymous self-reviews positioned his poetry as a response to the looming crisis of American union. Rather than foreseeing a crisis in formal institutions or law alone, Whitman understood the impending catastrophe as a crisis of lived democratic citizenship, of perception, of the felt experience of relation and attachment on which more formal political relationships are based. “The largeness of . . . the nation is monstrous,” Whitman wrote, “without a corresponding largeness and generosity in the spirit of the citizen.”¹ In responding to what he alternately characterized as a crisis of political detachment, solipsistic individualism, and sectional discord, *Leaves* worked to transfigure the quality of public attachments and to poetically reshape the way citizens imagined and felt their way into a common democratic people.

This project of political poesis was clearly announced in one of Whitman's self-reviews when he wrote that the poet's "whole work, his life, manners, friendships, writing" have "an evident purpose": that is "to stamp a new type of character . . . and indelibly fix it and publish it, not for a model but an illustration."² A crucial aspect of Whitman's "reconstructive poetics" was eliciting a citizenry capacious enough to embrace "the expansive and flowing breadth of American democracy," one that could establish attachments without cramping "the largeness and stir" of democratic politics that he so loudly affirmed and so warmly embraced.³ A central argument of this essay is that Whitman's image of promiscuous citizenship was his way of responding to a familiar dilemma of democratic theory: how to affectively bind citizens together as a self-authorizing people while mitigating the violence done to the plural constituencies that make up a democratic people; it was his way of navigating the dilemmas of democratic "binding" and "boundary."⁴ The role that promiscuous citizenship plays in Whitman's political thought is therefore analogous to that played by "constitutional patriotism" in some contemporary forms of political liberalism, or "civic nationalism" in some communitarian strands of republican political thought.⁵

Whitman's poetry reiterates time and again, on different registers, and with different inflections, the question: "What is then between us?"⁶ For him this question was particularly pressing because the usual means of political attachments were of no avail. "Here is not just a nation, but a teeming nation of nations." For Whitman, then, in the United States democratic attachment could not be achieved by Romantic appeal to a common tradition, language, ethnicity, or race, but reasoned allegiance to common principle was also too thinly cognitive, and obligation based in economic interest too narrowly calculating, to achieve the binding preconditions of democratic self-creation.⁷ For Whitman, the conditions of democracy, America, and the modern required an aesthetic supplement and a radical re-visioning of inherited images of political belonging.

Gilles Deleuze recognized this dimension of Whitman's poetry when he wrote that, for Whitman, "America is not the fragmentary but the spontaneity of the fragmentary," and that because "there is no innate sense of the organic" in Whitman's America, relations "must be [poetically] instituted or invented" that aim not at "totality" but that emerge from "particular traits, emotional circumstances and the interiority of the relevant fragments" as they are exposed to "an encounter from the Outside."⁸ I agree

with Deleuze's emphasis on the importance of the poetic establishment of relations in Whitman's work, but, as I elaborate below, I disagree that Whitman believed these relations were simply "instituted or invented" by the poet. Whitman aspired to a poetic translation of the ordinary and commonplace as the vehicle for political attachment. *Leaves* offered an image of citizenship—it was what Whitman would later call a "great image-making work"—that at once drew from and addressed itself to "the tremendous audacity of crowds and groupings" whose "push of perspective spreads with a crampless and flowing breadth."⁹

The felicitous image of promiscuous citizenship I reconstruct here is drawn primarily from Whitman's writing on the city, from what I characterize as his remarkable aesthetics of urban encounter. In one of his anonymous self-reviews, Whitman likened this new image of the democratic citizen to "the very harlot of persons. Right and left he flings his arms, drawing men and women with undeniable love to his close embrace, loving the clasp of their hands, the touch of their necks and breasts, and the sound of their voice. All else seems to burn up under his fierce affection for persons."¹⁰ Whitman is frequently celebrated as the "poet of the American city," one who "virtually alone among his peers . . . chose to extol the city's promise rather than lament its problems."¹¹ "Whitman felt the human crowd," William James famously wrote, "as rapturously as Wordsworth felt the mountains."¹² Less often noted is how Whitman's poetic translation of everyday urban experience contributed to his project of revising democratic citizenship. In Whitman's poetry, the promiscuity of urban encounter among anonymous strangers provides the experiential and affective basis for his dramatic reimagining of political attachment. For Whitman, the erotic energies among and between nonintimates were the very stuff of democratic spirit. In everyday urban encounters, he found what William Pannapacker has called "the promiscuous attractions of all people towards each other."¹³ Whitman embraced the erotics and anonymity of everyday urban encounters as the basis for envisioning—and poetically disseminating—new and less identarian forms of political attachment.

In this, Whitman broke from dominant modes of imaging citizenship in America, which were typically characterized by different versions of democratic anti-urbanism. This is true, for example, of the agrarian pastoral of Jeffersonian republicanism as well as the Transcendentalist embrace of "nature" and the "wild." The contrasting image of citizenship that Whit-

man offers is promiscuous in several senses of the word. It is promiscuous first in the sense of being *undiscriminating*. "He judges not as the judge judges," Whitman writes in the preface to *Leaves*, "but as the sun falling around a helpless thing."¹⁴ Second, it is promiscuous in the sense that it emerges from mixed and promiscuous public contact and is, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines one sense of the term, "mixed and disorderly in composition or character."¹⁵ Finally, it is promiscuous in the sense that it connotes erotic attachment to nonintimates. "Do you know," Whitman asks his reader, "what it is to be loved by strangers?" The essay's first section focuses on the democratic resources of ordinary and everyday attachments; the second section turns to how Whitman develops his normative understanding of this attachment from the aesthetics of anonymous urban encounter.

"The Poet Is the Joiner, He Sees How They Join"

Whitman understood the political crisis of the 1850s as more than a crisis in formal institutions, party politics, policy, or law. The "new frame of democracy," he would later write, cannot be "vivified and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, &c."¹⁶ Like Lincoln, for whom the civil religion of Union was transformed during this period from a reasoned commitment to the rule of law into a spiritual ideal that had "risen to the sublimity of religious mysticism,"¹⁷ Whitman recognized the importance of restoring Americans' corrupted appreciation of the common, but, in doing so, he also dramatically refigured the source and meaning of that commonality. Whitman "abolishes the usual human distinctions," James insightfully wrote, "brings all conventionalisms into solution, and loves and celebrates hardly any human attributes save those elementary ones common to all."¹⁸ "By God!" Whitman exclaims in *Leaves*, "I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."¹⁹ The "first purposes" and "unconscious, or mostly unconscious" intentions of *Leaves* were "to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, [Whitman's] own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality and that of current America," to poetically translate what he called his "[radically democratic] Me," and that of the people themselves.²⁰ "Into the vacuum created by the dissolution of the nation's political structures," writes David Reynolds, "rushed Whitman's

gargantuan I, assimilating images from virtually every aspect of antebellum American culture into a poetic document of togetherness offered to a nation that seemed on the verge of unraveling."²¹

On the basis of this poetic translation of the neglected common, Whitman aspired to refigure the basis of democratic attachment, a goal to which he remained committed throughout his long life. He set about expressing and enacting forms of attachment that did not rely on "edifices or rules or trustees or any argument," but instead on the poetic translation of what is already given, that which tacitly connects and unites: the "subtle currents" that attach human beings below the level of formal contracts, political institutions, and law. "That which really balances and conserves the social and the political world," Whitman wrote, "is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment, as the latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, &c." "This perennial self regulation," he continues, "is the *sine qua non* of democracy and the widest aim of democratic literature may well be to bring forth cultivate and strengthen this sense in individuals and society."²² This was Whitman's democratic version of what Wordsworth described as "a dark inscrutable workmanship that reconciles discordant elements, makes them cling together in one society."²³ Kerry Larson has called Whitman's bundled practices of immanent self-regulation the "constitution beneath the Constitution."²⁴ Whitman emphasized the difficulties as well as the vital importance of bringing these practices to poetic articulation and public awareness. He sought a poetry that would at once poetically translate and revivify these unnoticed and unsung ordinary capacities, and that could form the poetic basis of explicitly pronounced democratic attachments. "The profoundest service that poems can do for their reader," Whitman wrote, "is not merely to satisfy the intellect . . . nor even depict great passions, or persons or events, but to fill him with vigorousness and clean manliness, religiousness, and give him *good heart* as a radical possession and habit."²⁵ This process would work "inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses," and such poems would infuse "the religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual basis of the States."²⁶ Rather than being didactically imposed by some imperious poet-legislator, for Whitman these aesthetic-affective reforms were drawn from latent resources already present in a democratic people that were by him "clarified and transfigured."²⁷

As James recognized, the democratic resources of the ordinary and the

everyday are one of Whitman's great themes. Whitman was profoundly attuned to what some contemporary political theorists refer to as the politics of the ordinary.²⁸ Consider the following lines from "A Song for Occupations":

I bring what you much need yet always have,
 Not money, amours, dress, eating, erudition, but as good,
 I send no agent or medium, offer no representative of value,
 but offer the value itself.
 There is something that comes to one now and perpetually,
 It is not what is printed, preach'd, discussed, it eludes
 discussion and print,
 It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,
 It is for you whoever you are, it is no farther from you than
 your hearing and sight are from you
 It is hinted by nearest, commonest, readiest, it is ever
 provoked by them.²⁹

Whitman clearly shares the recurrent theme of turning to the resources of the "nearest, commonest, readiest" for ethical and political orientation with Emerson.³⁰ Through this theme, Whitman is able to present what is already given in democratic life as a resource for what ails democratic life, which he takes to be the threat of an isolating skepticism, of a kind of world-alienating solipsism. "The great laws take and effuse without argument."³¹ "To elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so / Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braded in the beams."³² Whitman takes this sense of the world defined by a wordless being with others as "the base of all metaphysics." Somewhat oddly, he uses the cognitive language of "conviction" to describe this sense of the worldly ordinary. Thus he writes that his poetry aims to "convince" beyond "logic and sermons," or to "convince" "like a slumbering woman and child convince."³³ "I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence."³⁴ He warns readers not "to conceive too much of articulation": "Do you know Oh speech how the buds beneath you are folded?"³⁵ This is a theme brilliantly elaborated in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

We understand, then, do we not?

What I promised without mentioning it, have you not
 accepted?
 What the study could not teach—what the preaching
 could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?³⁶

The democratic valence of bringing what one already has, the preservation and excitation of practices of immanent self-regulation and connection between strangers, is reflected in more than Whitman's aesthetic revaluation of "what is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest."³⁷ Whitman's poetry aims not only to ascribe aesthetic value to the commonest and the low, or to affirm the sublime multiplicity of the self, but to explore the workings of everyday attachments to others. In emphasizing this, I depart from readers who would overemphasize the Emersonian dimensions of Whitman's political thought. George Kateb, to take the best and most persuasive contemporary example, is right to argue that Whitman's "democratic aestheticism" seeks to "receive all things in the world as equal . . . to make the unpromising world worthy of attention; to grant standing to what seems not to merit it; and to hear the often silent or distorted appeal of everyone and everything for perception, interpretation, and contemplation."³⁸ William James is equally right to insist that Whitman hoped to save the "jaded and unquickened eye" from treating "the recurrent inanities of life" as "all dead and common, pure vulgarism, flatness, and disgust."³⁹ The emphasis that both Kateb and James place on receptive aesthetic (re)evaluation, however, does not adequately address Whitman's equally pronounced—perhaps even ontologically co-original—emphasis on magnetic, tacit, and subtle connections that bind individuals. These, too, make up the ordinary resources of that which "is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest." Whitman does not only aim to illuminate "the significance of alien lives," thereby overcoming "a certain blindness of human beings," but to illuminate the attachments that bind human beings beyond their recognition and consciousness: "The poet is the joiner," he writes, "he sees how they join."⁴⁰

The democratic contributions of Whitman's poet are not limited to a change in individual perception, but include establishing connections or what Whitman called "fusing contributions."⁴¹ This prompts Kerry Larson to describe Whitman's poems as "vehicles—or better yet, the occasion—for social cohesion."⁴² "I bequeath poems," Whitman writes, "as nutrient and influences" to Union, to show "themselves distinctly" and to intimate "what

they are for.”⁴³ Whitman rejected nonaesthetic bases of political attachment, most notably tradition, race, rationality, or interests. “The genuine union” cannot be based, he writes, “(as is generally supposed) either in self-interest, or common pecuniary or material objects.”⁴⁴ “Great literature,” or what Whitman sometimes simply calls “esthetics,” “penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals.”⁴⁵ The central problem, as Whitman understood it, was that democracy had not yet found its aesthetic expression, and so there was a tragic disconnection between formal democratic institutions and a culture still invested in forms of feudal hierarchy. “Long enough have the People been listening to poems [and singing songs] in which the common humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors. . . . Literature, strictly consider’d, has never recognized the People.”⁴⁶ While the aesthetic inheritance of feudalism established affections and attachments—we can think of Burke’s aesthetic theory of the “sweetness” of political authority—it did so by establishing relations of domination, deferential subordination, or contemptuous exclusion.⁴⁷ Whitman, as Nancy Rosenblum writes, “loved the spectacle of democratic diversity the same way that Burke loved monarchical plumage.”⁴⁸ Indeed, Whitman could be said to have a profound understanding of Burke’s dictum that to make a people love their country, their country must be lovely, but whereas Burke turned in disgust from the “swinish multitude,” Whitman sought to make the embodied and unrefined people the source of their own aesthetic attachments.⁴⁹

Whitman asked readers to “re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book,” and to allow these revaluations of equal human connection to settle into the body, and be manifest in gesture, disposition, manner and gait: “your very flesh shall be a great poem,” Whitman wrote, “and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.”⁵⁰ For Whitman it was not enough that democratic egalitarianism be conceptualized as a formal principle; it must be further inscribed in flesh. Affection, eros, amateness, attachment were essential components of this embodiment, of the manner through which the democratic people could become “a great passionate body.”⁵¹ While this theme is already clearly present in the first edition of *Leaves* (1855), it becomes more pronounced in each of the subsequent editions, as the crisis of the

1850s slides inexorably into the horror of Civil War. “The subtle fusion of diverse cultural images that he had attempted in 1855,” David Reynolds writes, “was replaced by overt insistence on national unity through magnetic, passionate friendship.”⁵²

Already in the second edition (1856), for example, Whitman included a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson that makes clear his hope that a dissemination of his poetry will work to stitch the ties of union, “for the union of the parts of the body is not more necessary to this life than the union of These States is to their life.”⁵³ However, the theme of democratic affection and public eros is most pronounced beginning with the third edition (1860), which includes the remarkable “Calamus” cluster, focused on “manly love,” “adhesiveness,” and the “love of comrades.” While some of these themes can already be detected in the first edition—“Urge and urge and urge,” Whitman writes there, “Always the procreant urge of the world”⁵⁴—they are nonetheless most pronounced in “Calamus.” Whitman would later write that the “special meaning of the Calamus cluster of *Leaves of Grass*. . . mainly resides in its political significance.”⁵⁵ At the conceptual center of this cluster of poems is the phrenological understanding of “adhesiveness,” which Whitman distinguished from romantic or intimate “amateness.” Whitman believed erotic attachment conceived in terms of intimacy and the private had been the exclusive focus of too much “imaginative literature” and sentimental fiction, greatly inflating the value of the intimate and domestic spheres and neglecting the powerful valences of *public* love. In the “Calamus” poems, by contrast, the focus is on not only the “dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,” but also “of the city for city and land for land.”⁵⁶

Consider the poem “For You O Democracy” from the cluster:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
 With the love of comrades,
 With the life-long love of comrades.
I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers
of America, and along the shores of the great lakes,
and all over the prairies,

I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each
 other's necks,
 By the love of comrades,
 By the manly love of comrades.
 For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma
 femme!
 For you, for you I am trilling these songs.⁵⁷

Whitman's focus throughout "Calamus" is on public erotic attachments that destabilize and overcome identarian differences of locality, ethnicity, class and occupation, sex, race, and sexuality. Some critics who have recognized what Samuel Beer describes as the "nation-centered purpose" of Whitman's poetry have insufficiently recognized the real novelty of Whitman's "democratic nationality." Beer, for example, construes Whitman as an advocate of the organic nationalism he believed broadly typical of nineteenth-century Romanticism. This fails to capture the novelty of Whitman's account of democratic nationality, and neglects what I take to be a central dilemma that Whitman hoped to navigate in his poetry, which is how to eroticize political attachments that would bind a democratic people while not succumbing to the erotic lures of demonization. "Of all dangers to a nation, as things exist in our day," Whitman wrote, "there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account."⁵⁸ Or, as he writes in *Leaves*:

I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
 The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited
 . . . the . . . slave is invited . . . the
 venerealee is invited,
 There shall be no difference between them and the rest.⁵⁹

Whitman's relation to the nation and nationality are filled with ambivalence from beginning to end, an ambivalence captured in the title of a late fragment: "Nationality—(and yet)."⁶⁰ It is undeniably true that Whitman claimed his poetry to be "autochthonous song"; that the "ambitious thought of [his] song is to help the forming of a great aggregate nation"; that he cites Herder on the poetic expression of "national spirit." Nonetheless, for

Whitman, nationality was inextricably linked to a horizon of unrealized futurity.⁶¹ Its inclusiveness is based in what he called the "greatest lesson of New World politics," "the lessons of variety and freedom."⁶²

Whitman's emphasis on nationality serves primarily to overcome the privation of privatism; through it, he places emphasis on public identity and critiques the limitations of what he called "the prudent citizen." Like other American Romantics, Whitman was appalled by what he called the "toss and pallor of years of moneymaking." He thought the narrow obsession with moneymaking and private life was "the great fraud upon modern civilization and forethought."⁶³ Whitman is, among other things, America's great poet of public life, not in the sense of public office, but in the sense of investing public identity with meaning and significance. It is not so much national identification that Whitman is calling for, in my view, as an erotic attachment to a common and public world comprised of vital differences.

One of Whitman's great innovations was that he modeled this understanding of public life and citizenship on his experience of urban life: not the urban life of the Athenian agora, or the Italian city-state, but of the bustling commercial metropolis of nineteenth-century New York City. *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote, "arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years, with an intimacy, an eagerness, and abandon probably never equaled."⁶⁴ In everyday promiscuous encounters with a procession of anonymous others, Whitman found the experiential basis for an ethos appropriate to what Deleuze called the "spontaneous fragments" of democracy. It is from "the love of strangers" on the city streets that Whitman's new image of citizenship—of promiscuous citizenship—would arise.

"This Is the City and I Am One of the Citizens"

To get a sense of Whitman's radical revaluation of the promise of urban experience and urban consciousness for democratic politics, it may be useful to sketch the background of the democratic anti-urbanism to which he was responding. Early theorists of American democracy emphasized an inherent tension, if not outright antagonism or contradiction, between democratic politics and the city. Their criticisms still resonate in the sneering invocations of coastal elites and the embrace of "pro-American" towns and counties; even the former mayor of New York City now ridicules out-of-touch

cosmopolitans. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville wrote, "I look upon the size of certain American cities and above all the nature of their inhabitants as a genuine danger threatening the future of the democratic republics of the New World." He continued: "I do not hesitate to predict that that will be the source of their downfall unless their government succeeds in creating an armed force which will remain under the control of the majority of the nation, but which will be independent of the town population and thus able to repress its excesses."⁶⁵ For Tocqueville, the danger posed by American cities was that in them "men cannot be prevented from concerting together and awakening a mutual excitement that prompts sudden and passionate resolutions." Cities should be viewed as "great assemblies," he wrote, that "frequently wield astonishing influence over their magistrates and often carry their desires into execution without the latter's intervention."⁶⁶ Tocqueville toured America during a period of mobbish vigilantism, and the passages he dedicates to the subject in *Democracy in America* are haunted by the specter of the revolutionary Parisian underclass. But Tocqueville's concern was not limited to the immediate context of the 1830s, nor was it singularly French in its articulation.

The dangers posed by cities and their endemic corruption to democratic, or more accurately republican, politics was an essential part of the civic republican or "Country" discourse that had such a formative influence on early American political thought.⁶⁷ In early America, democratic anti-urbanism was not so much a bias, Thomas Bender writes, as a "political philosophy and a definition of a social ideal."⁶⁸ Thomas Jefferson was the preeminent early American theorist of democratic anti-urbanism. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote that "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor, a degeneracy of these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of the laws and constitution."⁶⁹ For Jefferson, the independence of mind and spirit that guarantees the liberties of a free republic was materially grounded in the conditions of independent landholding. As his friend David Ramsay put the point: "with no other dependence than on Almighty God . . . for his daily labor," the yeoman farmer guarantees "the continuance of [American] liberties."⁷⁰ As long as the vast majority of citizens were self-sufficient yeoman farmers, the republic would be immune to the corruption and factionalism that had undermined earlier

experiments in republican politics. The vast expanse of western territory was, for Jefferson and many of his contemporaries, therefore the key to preserving the liberties of the people, and at the same time preventing the corrupting growth of large urban populations, which Jefferson described as "a cloacina of all of the depravities of human nature."⁷¹ So deep was Jefferson's democratic anti-urbanism that, in a letter to the physician and social reformer Benjamin Rush, he wrote that urban America's ruinous yellow fever epidemics would at least have the advantage of discouraging "the growth of great cities in our nation," which are "pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man."⁷²

While Jefferson's anti-urbanism was expressly political and motivated by an overriding commitment to democratic freedoms and independent citizenship, it overlapped in many ways with broader moral reform movements in the first half of the nineteenth century. The understanding of urban populations as "vicious," "abandoned," and "debased" was a commonplace of this discourse. But rather than the Jeffersonian focus on the threats the city posed to virtuous citizenship, these movements, as the historian Paul Boyer has written, responded primarily to the perceived "erosion of an organic sense of community in a period of urban growth."⁷³ Christian moralists railed against the rootless populations of the city and the shamelessness of their behavior in the absence of communal norms. The association between city populations and shameless depravity was so strong that even Whitman was not above reproving urban populations for their "abnormal libidinousness."⁷⁴ The Christian reform efforts that responded to this condition attempted to "devise an urban analogue to the informal but continuous and pervasive scrutiny of behavior upon which the preurban moral order rested. What had been an organic feature of village life would be re-created in the city through voluntary organized effort, systematic surveillance, and journalistic publicity."⁷⁵ These antebellum Christian reform movements hoped to engender in city populations the very reformatory sense of shame and self-disgust that Whitman's more characteristic "comprehensive program of disgust-extirpation" sought to diminish if not completely overcome.⁷⁶

Closer to Whitman's own time, and much closer to his own political and philosophical orientations, was the anti-urbanism that emerged with American Romanticism in general, and with the Concord Transcendentalists in particular. Transcendentalists abandoned the conceptual rubric of

civic and moral corruption in their writings on the city and replaced it with the more distinctly modern conceptual rubric of alienation. If Jefferson worried that cities engendered corrupting economic dependence and decadence, Emerson and Thoreau took the challenge to self-reliance to be a much more encompassing alienation of self and Nature. They sought not only an economic and political independence, but a “greater self-reliance that must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men; in their religion, in their education, in their pursuits, their modes of living, their association; in their property; in their speculative views.”⁷⁷ For both Emerson and Thoreau, cities undermined this ideal of self-reliance by proliferating artificial needs—“Cities degrade us,” Emerson wrote, “by magnifying trifles”⁷⁸—and entrapped individuals within an intricate choreography of false determinations and corrupted human relationships. “I always seem to suffer some loss of faith in entering cities,” Emerson wrote in a letter to Carlyle, “they are great conspiracies; the parties are all maskers, who have taken mutual oaths of silence not to betray each other’s secret and each to keep the other’s madness in countenance.”⁷⁹

For Emerson, the actually existing city—as opposed to regenerative promise of what Thoreau would call “the eternal city of the west . . . [the] Salamanca of the imagination”⁸⁰—was a place of convention, commerce, calculation, instrumentality, and narrow legibility. Emerson sometimes portrays the city as an iron cage of rationality—“it is made up of finites: short, sharp, mathematical lines, all calculable. It is full of varieties, of successions, of contrivances.” He contrasts the constricted legibility of this built environment with the stimulating capaciousness of the country: “The country, on the contrary, offers an unbroken horizon, the monotony of an endless road, of vast uniform plains, of distant mountains, the melancholy of uniform and infinite vegetation; the objects on the road are few and worthless, the eye is invited ever to the horizon and the clouds.”⁸¹ Both thinkers associate the country and solitude with the regenerative aesthetic experience of the sublime, whereas the city is associated with narrow repetition, “rows upon rows of facts,” and the instrumentalization of human relations. Emerson eloquently captured this contrast in an entry from his journal:

Rest on your humanity, and it will supply you with strength and hope and vision for a day. Solitude and the country, books, and openness will feed you; but go into the city—I am afraid there is no morning on chestnut street, it is

full of rememberers, they shun each other’s eyes, they are all wrinkled with memory of the tricks they have played, or mean to play on each other, of petty arts and aims all contracting and lowering their aspect and character.⁸²

Emerson’s idea that urbanism is associated with a particular form of subjectivity, with a “mode of consciousness,” prefigures in interesting ways some of the central insights of later urban sociologists like Georg Simmel or David Riesman.⁸³ Thoreau, of course, developed the theme of diminished individuality and compromised modes of belonging and of the redemptive power of solitude, nature, and wild in *Walden*. According to Stanley Cavell, *Walden* is best read as “a tract of political education” that “locates authority in the citizens and it identifies citizens . . . as neighbors.” It shows that “education for citizenship is education for isolation.”⁸⁴ Shannon Mariotti has similarly argued for the democratic resources of Thoreau’s “politics of withdrawal,” as a practice that cultivates the capacities of critical negation necessary for democratic citizenship.⁸⁵ And Jane Bennett has explored the politically productive disorientation and unsettlement that comes from contact with “the tonic of wildness.”⁸⁶ I agree with the broad outlines of these readings. Thoreau’s isolation at Walden Pond—his stripping away of all false determinations, conventions, and institutions to return to life—shares much with the decentering provocations of urban encounter we find in Whitman’s poetry. There are interesting continuities and discontinuities in their competing aesthetics of citizenship, but here I want to briefly emphasize the discontinuities.

“What do we want most to dwell near to?” Thoreau asks in *Walden*. “Not to many men, surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar room, the meeting house, the school house, the grocery, Beacon Hill or Five Points . . . but to the perennial source of our life.”⁸⁷ For Thoreau, social encounters were hopelessly mediated by social convention and repetition; they were diminishing of singularity as they enacted over and over again scenes of social subjection and alienation. “The utmost nearness to which men approach each other,” he writes, “amounts barely to a mechanical contact.”⁸⁸ In the “Village” chapter of *Walden*, where this theme is richly developed, Thoreau writes that in our “trivial walks” and in our social behavior, “we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands,” but it is only when we are completely lost that we appreciate “the vastness and strangeness of nature”: “Not till we are

lost, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."⁸⁹ What Thoreau describes as the disorienting "tonic of wildness" is "the requirement that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, unfathomed by us because unfathomable."⁹⁰ In witnessing the transgression of "our own limits," we cultivate a heightened awareness of the artificial determinations that bind us and our interconnectedness. It is through a practical attentiveness to daily acts of orienting disorientation that the groundwork is laid for "the re-origination of many of the institutions of society," Thoreau writes.

Unlike Thoreau, Whitman finds a similarly regenerative power in the aesthetics of urban encounter. There is no unsettling psychogeography of the city in Thoreau's work, as there is in Whitman's. Rather than treating withdrawal and isolation as the necessary conditions of a more critically responsive practice of citizenship, it is through the anonymous encounters of urban life that this regenerative sense of the sublime is cultivated and elicited—"a sense of power, fullness, . . . [and] continued exaltation."⁹¹ When Thoreau read *Leaves*, he wrote, "it is as if beasts spoke."⁹² When Whitman read *Walden*, he wrote that "the great vice in Thoreau's composition was his disdain of cities, companions, civilization."⁹³ Whitman has been described as the "poet who introduced the city to American literature," one who waged a "revolution against the poetic resources of his heretofore pastoral culture."⁹⁴ This role was in fact an important part of Whitman's self-understanding. "I realize . . . that not Nature alone is great in her fields of freedom and the open air, in her storms, the shows of night and day, the mountains the forests, sea—but in the artificial, the work of man too is equally great—in this profusion of teeming humanity—these hurrying feverish electric crowds of men."⁹⁵ Nowhere is this contrast more clearly articulated and developed than in his two-part poem "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun." In the poem's first part, Whitman marshals with heightened irony the well-worn Romantic tropes of Nature's sublimity—"Give me solitude, give me Nature, give me again O Nature your primal sanities!" But the poem's second part marks an abrupt shift:

Keep your splendid silent sun,
Keep your woods O Nature, and the quiet places by the
woods,

.....
Give me faces and streets—give me these phantoms
incessant and endless along the trottoirs!
Give me interminable eyes—give me women—give me
comrades and lovers by the thousand!
Let me see new ones every day—let me hold new ones
by the hand every day!
.....
O such for me! O an intense life, full to repletion and varied!
.....
People, endless, streaming, with strong voices, passions,
pageants
.....
Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!
Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.⁹⁶

In such passages Whitman refigures the city as the locus of a restorative sublimity—"interminable," "incessant," "intense," "endless" pageants and crowds—one that did not spring from solitude and isolation but from promiscuous encounters with numberless strangers—interminable eyes and faces, lovers by the thousands. Whitman refused the conventional Romantic association of the city with alienation and delusive appearances, the treatment of "men and women crowding fast in the street" as nothing more than ghostly "flashes and specks."⁹⁷ For while the city posed for Whitman the "terrible doubt of appearances"—and therefore raised the isolating specter of skepticism—it also provided the ordinary resources for overcoming this doubt with a renewed and vital sense of having a place in the world with others, a sense of erotic attachment to others who nonetheless remain strangers.⁹⁸ For Whitman, the fact that we remain strangers is not something to be overcome, but rather the very condition of our affective bond; strangeness and urban anonymity are not marks of alienated human relation or the collapse of authentic community, but the basis of erotic attachment. Through the poetic translation of what Michael Warner has provocatively called "the phenomenology of cruising," Whitman envisions a way of relating as citizens that affectively binds without relying on mechanisms of identification.⁹⁹

"When I mix with these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good natured, independent citizens, mechanics, clerks, young persons," Whit-

man wrote, "a singular awe falls upon me."¹⁰⁰ Some readers have associated the "singular awe" Whitman experienced in the spectacle of urban life, what he called the city's "visor'd, vast, unspeakable show and lesson,"¹⁰¹ with that other great consumer of nineteenth-century urban spectacle, the *flâneur*, whom Baudelaire characterized as a "passionate spectator." "Whitman not only knew the *flâneur*," the critic Dana Brand writes, "he was a *flâneur*."¹⁰² It is true that Whitman's celebrations of the endless processions and pageants of his "Mannahatta," his self-description as a "great loafer," and his aesthetic appreciation for the city's abrupt contrasts of high and low, beautiful and ugly, ignoble and magnificent, sometimes suggest the detached aestheticism of the *flâneur*. This is especially true of some of his early writing in newspapers like the *New York Aurora*, and in his letters to his probable lover Peter Doyle.¹⁰³ Before writing *Leaves*, Whitman had spent over a decade writing for newspapers and reviews on "this great, dirty, blustering, glorious, ill-lighted, aristocratic, squalid, rich, wicked, and magnificent metropolis,"¹⁰⁴ and in a letter to Doyle, Whitman described himself as a "great loafer who enjoys so much seeing the busy world move by him, and exhibiting itself for his amusement, while he takes it easy and just looks on and observes."¹⁰⁵

The *flâneur*, however, does not adequately model the remarkable combination of unsettled wonder and erotic attachment that characterizes Whitman's aesthetics of urban encounter in the poetry of *Leaves of Grass*. The spectatorial experience of the *flâneur*, as Walter Benjamin theorizes it, is essentially one of being "out of place," taking aesthetic pleasure in one's detachment from the enfolding spectacle of urban life.¹⁰⁶ "The *flâneur* does not participate in the spectacles he describes, preferring to look and comment, as if the city and its people were a series of department store windows prepared for his visual, consumerist delight."¹⁰⁷ Whitman's man in the crowd, by contrast, is essentially engaged in and a part of the urban spectacle itself. Whitman writes from within and among the crowd, never in bemused or contemptuous detachment from it. "Both in and out of the game," as he puts it in one of his poems, "and watching and wondering at it."¹⁰⁸ Consistently situating himself "among the multitude," Whitman writes, "I descend to the pavements, merge with the crowd, and gaze with them."¹⁰⁹ "The experience of the street," however, is not only "the epitome of democratic consciousness" for Whitman, as James Dougherty has per-

ceptively written, but also the site of a more embodied subjectivity and relation of contact encompassing dispositions, gestures, touch, and gait.¹¹⁰

Whitman writes that he received "curious abrupt questionings" from mingling with urban crowds, but he makes it clear that these were not only intellectual or cognitive events. The city is filled with "askers" that "unsettle what was settled," but their provocations and questionings are sensed and felt more than they are understood. In the innumerable encounters with strangers on the city street, Whitman cultivated a sense of being beyond himself, a processional provocation of subjective dissolution and wonder: I could be you, I could be you, I could be you, I could be you. He at once describes and hopes to poetically elicit "the wonder everyone sees in every one else he sees."¹¹¹ Consider the processional encounters Whitman relays in the "interminable," "incessant," "intense," "endless" lists of *Leaves of Grass*, which Wai Chee Dimock has insightfully described as "a poetry of sequence without sedimentation, a poetry that sallies forth, its syntactic possibilities unmarked and undiminished by what it has been through."¹¹² Such open-ended sequentialism is exemplified in these famous lines from "Song of Myself":

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk
of the promenaders
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb,
The clank of the shod horses on the granite floor . . .
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs . . .
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,¹¹³

Whitman works the accumulation of these sensory encounters—these "curious abrupt questionings"—into a series of reflections, thoughts bubbling up from perception:

What living and buried speech is always vibrating here,
what howls restrained by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made,
Acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come
and I depart.¹¹⁴

Frequently in *Leaves of Grass*, and perhaps especially in the unnamed poems that comprise the first edition, the series of encounters related in the present tense shift to provoked reflections, and then to decentered perspectives on these encounters, to an unsettling decentering of self. Whitman uncannily becomes a series of encountered others:

I am the free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires . . .
 I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs . . .
 I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken . . .
 I am the artillerist, I tell of my fort's bombardment . . .¹¹⁵

In such passages, Whitman moves from the incessant encounters of urban life to imagined perspectives of others to loosen the grip of "one single naturalized perspective."¹¹⁶ The cultivation of wonder at both the unbridgeable separation between strangers in the street and at the affective attachment that nonetheless binds them—"What is more subtle," Whitman asks, "than this which ties me to the man or woman that looks in my face?"¹¹⁷—is indeed a kind of self-alienation, but one that is best understood as democratically productive rather than defeating. It does not simply engender a sense of reciprocity or mutual recognition—as some admiring political theorists have claimed—but rather a wonder and attachment to what he calls, in "Democratic Vistas," the "lessons of variety and freedom."¹¹⁸

The city, then, for Whitman is a figure of excess, and Michel de Certeau's insights about representations of the city having to represent its ultimate unrepresentability certainly applies to Whitman's aesthetics of urban encounter.¹¹⁹ The "interminable," "incessant," "intense," "endless" encounters of Whitman's poetry always seem to point to a horizon beyond themselves, to encounters that fall outside of the frame of experience. Like Whitman's lists, which seem to arbitrarily begin and end, and to thereby direct the reader's imagination to what lies beyond them, the urban encounters on which these lists are based elicit a sense of exaltation in the face of the city's very unmappability. Whitman's "mettlesome, mad, extravagant city" submits "to no models."¹²⁰ The city, then, is not a space of legibility or transparency for Whitman, and he does not nostalgically long for such legibility.¹²¹ He is poorly read as endorsing an "aesthetics of identity" wherein "each person becomes transparent to every other."¹²² Nor does he aim to replace "reflective judgment" with "all-encompassing affect"

and "physiological affection."¹²³ To understand how Whitman navigates the tension between reflective unsettlement and passionate connection and investment in the world, we have to return to Whitman's poetry of public attachment.

If urban encounter provoked abrupt questionings that engendered wonder at the contingency of the self, it also offered instructions on the subtle forms of attachment between strangers, not through personal and partial relations of intimacy, but of eroticized impersonality. Urban encounters are the occasion for Whitman's poetic reflections on the democratic "being together of strangers."¹²⁴ "Passing stranger!" he writes, "You do not know how longingly I look upon you, / . . . / All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste matured."¹²⁵ The orchestration of passing glances and longing looks between strangers become one important way that Whitman reenvision forms of the erotics of citizenship uncorrupted by partial attachments. He isolates a queer proximity between cruising and citizenship.

Among the men and women the multitude,
 I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
 Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband,
 brother, child, any nearer than I am,
 Some are baffled, but that one is not—that one knows me.
 Ah lover and perfect equal,
 I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections.¹²⁶

In such passages, Whitman is not only dwelling on what James called the "significance of alien lives," or cultivating an admirable receptivity to otherness. He puzzles over the love that can exist between strangers as strangers, a love and attachment that does not try to convert the stranger into an intimate, but retains a distance, perhaps "a pathos of distance."¹²⁷ The connection is there, but only by "indirection." In other poems, he even more explicitly connects the erotic attachments to strangers who remain strangers to the pleasures of furtive urban encounters. Consider this poem from the "Calamus" cluster:

CITY of orgies, walks and joys,

Not the pageants of you, not your shifting tableaux, your
spectacles, repay me,

.....
Not those, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash
of eyes offering me love,

Offering response to my own—these repay me,
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.¹²⁸

Whitman hoped to poetically reenact his aesthetics of urban encounter, with its combined emphasis on unsettling estrangement and promiscuous attachment, and its contributions to a “free and generous spirit in the citizenry,” in the physical encounter he staged between readers and his poetic body in—or as—*Leaves of Grass*. This final claim could be elaborated and defended in various ways: by looking at the passages where Whitman describes reading as “a gymnasts struggle,” where the “reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert . . . the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start,”¹²⁹ or in those passages where he describes the contact between his body/text and his reader’s hands as a form of promiscuous touching. However, the best evidence of this claim may, appropriately enough, be in the physical design of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* itself.

In the first edition, Whitman replaced his proper name with an imagistic surrogate. Opposite the book’s title, as the book’s frontispiece, he placed a suggestive, and—based on the many reviews that mentioned it—highly provocative engraving of himself (see page 340). Whitman stares at the reader, defiant in his open-collared shirt, rumpled pants, and tilted hat. This famous image of Whitman “the rough” has been frequently discussed by scholars for the political self-representation it enacts: Whitman is portrayed as a common man, not a dandy; as a sensuous body, not a composed intellect. One contemporary critic expressed his disgust for “this repulsive, loaferish portrait with its sensual mouth.”¹³⁰ The image seems to confirm the poet James Russell Lowell’s description of Whitman as “a rowdy, a New York tough, a loafer, a frequenter of low places, a friend of cab drivers!”¹³¹ It is my sense that the key to understanding Whitman’s provocative use of this image as the frontispiece to *Leaves* lies not only in its modalities of self-representation but in the relation it attempts to enact and establish with its viewer (who is not yet a reader). Whitman’s replacement of image for text foregrounds the usually unremarked sensuousness of reading, and

both makes visible and attempts to overcome the necessary textual mediation between the body of the poet and the body of the viewer.

Come closer to me,

.....
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper
between us

I pass so poorly with paper and types . . . I must pass
with the contact of bodies and souls.¹³²

In prefacing the poetry with the image of his body, Whitman attempts to visually enact the anonymous and promiscuous encounters of the democratic street, with their “curious abrupt questionings” and their furtive and indiscrete attachments. This reading is supported by Whitman’s own illuminating reference to the image as “the street figure.”¹³³ Whitman refuses to frame or contain the public’s encounter with his poems by reference to his proper name. *Leaves* as a whole works to establish a relationship with its audience that duplicates the disorienting and affective scenes of furtive encounter that Whitman celebrated in urban life. He hoped the dissemination of these encounters through the circulation of his body of poems would work to reinvigorate democratic life in the United States and provide a new aesthetic basis for the weakened bonds of Union.

Notes

1. Whitman, Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 6.
2. Anonymous [Walt Whitman], “Walt Whitman, A Brooklyn Boy,” in *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price, 21–22 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21.
3. Whitman, Preface (1855), 5. On Whitman’s “reconstructive poetics,” see Allen Grossman, “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry toward the Relationship of Art and Policy,” in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, 183–208 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 184.
4. Clarissa Rile Hayward, “Binding Problems, Boundary Problems: The Trouble with ‘Democratic Citizenship,’” in *Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances*,

ed. Seyla Benhabib, Ian Shapiro, and Danilo Petranovi, 181–205 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

5. See Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

6. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in *Poetry and Prose*, 310.

7. Whitman, Preface (1855), 5.

8. Gilles Deleuze, "Whitman," in *Essays: Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael Greco, 56–60 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58, 60.

9. Whitman, Preface (1855), 5.

10. Anonymous [Walt Whitman], "Walt Whitman and His Poems," in *Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Price, 13.

11. Heather Roberts, "The Problem of the City," in *A Companion to American Fiction, 1780–1865*, ed. Shirley Samuels, 287–300 (New York: Blackwell, 2007), 298.

12. William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *Writings: 1878–1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers, 841–60 (New York: Library of America, 1992), 851.

13. William Pannapacker, "The City," in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings, 42–59 (New York: Blackwell, 2006), 59, 54.

14. Whitman, Preface (1855), 9.

15. "Promiscuous," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

16. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *Poetry and Prose*, 959.

17. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Norton, 1962), 99.

18. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 851.

19. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 50.

20. Whitman, "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," in *Poetry and Prose*, 658. I explore Whitman's aesthetic translation of the vox populi in "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People," *Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 402–30.

21. David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 86.

22. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 1013.

23. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 55.

24. Kerry C. Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 14.

25. Whitman, "Backward Glance," 667.

26. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 956.

27. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 50.

28. See Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

29. Whitman, "A Song for Occupations," in *Poetry and Prose*, 357.

30. Stanley Cavell explores this theme with great depth and insight. See, for example, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989).

31. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 140.

32. *Ibid.*, 28.

33. *Ibid.*, 98.

34. Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," 303.

35. Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Poetry and Prose*, 213.

36. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," 312.

37. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 38.

38. George Kateb, "Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility," in *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*, 117–49 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); 143; see also "Whitman and the Culture of Democracy," in *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 240–66.

39. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 854.

40. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 130.

41. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 957.

42. Larson, *Drama of Consensus*, xvi.

43. Whitman, Preface (1876).

44. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 960.

45. *Ibid.*, 957.

46. *Ibid.*, 968.

47. On the aesthetic dimensions of Burke's political theory, and in particular his understanding of the aesthetics of political authority, see Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994).

48. Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Strange Attractors: How Individualists Connect to Form Democratic Unity," in this volume, 56–57.

49. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 68.

50. Whitman, Preface (1855), 11.

51. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 1013.

52. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 401.

53. Whitman, "Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *Poetry and Prose*, 1351–61.

54. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 28.
55. Whitman, Preface (1876), in *Poetry and Prose*, 129–38. Already in Whitman's own time, however, and certainly in our own, readers emphasized the homoerotic dimensions of the "Calamus" poems. Michael Moon, for example, has argued that the section offers a "critique of the culture's increasingly harsh repression of homoerotic desire as death-dealing." Whitman resisted the homoerotic associations when they were brought to his attention by John Addington Symonds, but later suggested these poems may have had meanings that escaped his conscious intent (Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991], 170; Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 396).
56. Whitman, "The Base of All Metaphysics," in *Poetry and Prose*, 275.
57. Whitman, "For You O Democracy," in *Poetry and Prose*, 272.
58. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 973.
59. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 44.
60. Whitman, "Nationality—(And Yet)," in *Poetry and Prose*, 1074–76.
61. Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy," 27–29.
62. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 953.
63. Whitman, Preface (1855), 20. See Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
64. Quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 83.
65. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (New York: Penguin, 2003), 325.
66. *Ibid.*
67. See, most obviously, Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).
68. Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 4.
69. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 165.
70. David Ramsay, *History of the United States: From Their First Settlement as English Colonies, in 1607, to the Year 1808* (Philadelphia, 1808), 35.
71. Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to William Short, September 8, 1823," in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (1905), 15:469.
72. Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800," in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (1903), 10:173.
73. Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America: 1820–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 56.
74. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 963.

75. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order*, 19.
76. Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 122.
77. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays: First and Second Series*, 29–52 (New York: Library of America, 1990), 45.
78. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Culture," in *The Conduct of Life*, 131–66 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 153.
79. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Letter to Thomas Carlyle, March 18, 1840." While I depart from their interpretations, I was directed to these passages by Morton White and Lucia White's *The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 21–34.
80. Henry David Thoreau, "Summer," in *Journals of Henry David Thoreau*.
81. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 5 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 311. "In our large cities," Emerson elsewhere writes, "the population is godless, materialized, no bond, no fellow-feeling, no enthusiasm. These are not men, but hungers, thirsts, fevers, and appetites walking."
82. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, ed. Bliss Perry (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 264.
83. For instance, Simmel writes in his seminal essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" that the "swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" characteristic of city life leads to the rapid development of the "protective organ of consciousness," and that the resulting calculating and blasé mode of subjectivity leads to the exclusion of "irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits." Simmel describes the resulting relations between urban strangers in ways that also resonate with Emerson's account: these relations are regulated by "a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which, in close contact . . . can break out into hatred and violence." The form of subjectivity interpolated by urban life is devoid of all enchantment, infused with calculating consciousness, and soullessly "other directed." According to Simmel, the city has always been the enemy of great individualists like Nietzsche. If we can hear Emerson's words resounding here, Whitman's influence infuses the work of such urbanists as Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennet, and Samuel Delaney (Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971], 224–39, 231).
84. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 85.
85. Shannon Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

86. Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1994).
87. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 178.
88. Henry David Thoreau, *The Journals of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1962), 38.
89. Thoreau, *Walden*, 217.
90. *Ibid.*, 366.
91. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 962.
92. Quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 364.
93. Quoted in Pannacker, "The City," 49.
94. James Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), xiii, 30.
95. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 962.
96. Whitman, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," in *Poetry and Prose*, 447.
97. Whitman, "There Was a Child Went Forth," in *Poetry and Prose*, 493.
98. Whitman, "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances," in *Poetry and Prose*, 274–75.
99. Michael Warner, "Whitman Drunk," in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 269–90 (New York: Zone, 2002), 287.
100. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 979.
101. Whitman, "Broadway," in *Poetry and Prose*, 624.
102. Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43.
103. See *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora, Editor at Twenty-two: A Collection of Recently Discovered Writings*, ed. Joseph Jay Rubin and Charles H. Brown (State College, Pa.: Bald Eagle Press, 1950).
104. Cited in Eldwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 706.
105. Walt Whitman, "Letter to Peter Doyle October 9, 1869," in *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, 2:56–58 (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 2:57.
106. On Benjamin's theory of the *flâneur*, see Susan Buck-Morss, "The *Flâneur*, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique* 39 (1986): 99–140.
107. Pannacker, "The City," 43.
108. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 30.
109. Whitman, "A Broadway Pageant," in *Poetry and Prose*, 384.
110. Dougherty, *Citizen's Eye*, 32.

111. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 92.
112. Wai Chee Dimock, "Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman, 62–79 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 73.
113. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 33.
114. *Ibid.*, 34.
115. *Ibid.*, 65.
116. Alan Trachtenberg, "Whitman's Lesson of the City," in *Breaking Bounds*, ed. Erkkila and Grossman, 171.
117. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," 312.
118. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 953.
119. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 91–110.
120. Whitman, "City of Ships," in *Poetry and Prose*, 430.
121. The ultimate illegibility of city life in Whitman's work, however, clearly does not terminate in paralyzing skepticism or alienation. Here the best contrast text is Poe's "Man in the Crowd." In that story, the illegibility of Poe's eponymous man in the crowd, the inscrutability of his motivations, the "waywardness of his actions," "arouses," "startles," and "fascinates" the narrator. But the narrator's growing captivation by this "phantom" and "ghost" leads not to any enchantment, wonder, or productive disorientation. Rather, the narrator turns away in horror and disgust at the anonymous man in the crowd, who, for Poe, expresses "the type and genius of deep crime." "Es lasst sich nicht lesen" because the man of the crowd has no soul to read (Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales* [New York: Library of America, 1984], 388–96).
122. Philip Fisher, "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency," *Representations* 24 (1988): 67.
123. Mary Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 27, 28.
124. For an insightful discussion of the "being together of strangers" in contemporary democratic theory, see Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 237.
125. Whitman, "To a Stranger," in *Poetry and Prose*, 280.
126. Whitman, "Among the Multitude," in *Poetry and Prose*, 286.
127. The phrase is Nietzsche's. On the democratic significance of a "pathos of distance," see William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 184–97.
128. Whitman, "City of Orgies," in *Poetry and Prose*, 279.
129. Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 1016.

130. Quoted in Ed Folsom, "Appearing in Print: Illustrations of the Self in Leaves of Grass," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, 135–65 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 136.

131. Quoted *ibid.*, 137.

132. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), 89.

133. Quoted in Folsom, "Appearing in Print," 139.

CHAPTER 8

Walt Whitman and the Ethnopoetics of New York

Michael J. Shapiro

Holding the pencil like one lonely chopstick
& grasping the pad like an empty plate
Waiting to be filled:
Nothing decorous but our own clinging minds
& the piling of her smooth black hair
—John Yau, *Crossing Canal Street*

Introduction: The Whitman Effect

WALT WHITMAN'S INFLUENCE ON generations of artists, writers, and poets in America and throughout the world is undeniable.¹ The lines, imagery, sentiments, and subjects of attention in his poems continue to emerge in novels, poetry, music, and other art forms. The title and much of the imagery and focus of his poem "I Sing the Body Electric," for example, have migrated into a wide variety of texts, among which are a science fiction story, a Manhattan novel, and an analysis of jazz.² Moreover, his song imagery (his most pervasive figuration) has motivated and energized both musical compositions and literary works. In this investigation, my concern is less with the breadth of Whitman's influence than with its ethnopoetical realizations and reinlections as they are articulated in and on the city of New York. Rather than simply demonstrating influence, my aim is to show how applications and alterations of Whitman's musico-poetical subject generate an apprehension of the micropolitics of interethnic New York, while