CREATING DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: IDENTITY, POLITICAL RENEWAL, AND INTERNATIONALISM IN WALT WHITMAN’S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

CARL M. NAJDEK: CreatingDemocratic Culture: Identity, Political Renewal, and Internationalism in Walt Whitman’s Political Thought
(Under the direction of Michael Lienesch)

This study investigates Walt Whitman’s democratic political theory. Contrary to prevailing interpretations that see him as an enthusiastic but relatively uncritical democrat, it reveals a thinker who used his artistic and intellectual talents to invigorate democratic thinking in response to the tumultuous events of mid-nineteenth century. Using Whitman’s mature work beginning with his 1855 Leaves of Grass, it proceeds chronologically, investigating his thought as it developed in his later poetry and prose, especially his 1871 Democratic Vistas. Through a close reading of his political writings, correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts, the study examines three critical dimensions of his thought: identity, political renewal, and internationalism. Underpinning each of these themes is Whitman’s depiction of democratic culture. Serving as a foundation for a shared national and ultimately international identity, he saw this culture as the affective glue that could hold democracy together, instilling democratic principles in the everyday practices of the people. With the expansion of modern democracy around the world, Whitman’s political thought provides both insight and inspiration to democratic thinkers in our times.
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Introduction: Walt Whitman and Democratic Thought

The most loved and reviled American poet of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman has been a topic of fascination for generations. Yet while scholars have studied his work extensively, they have said too little about its character as democratic theory. Writing at roughly the same time as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville in United States and John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx in Europe, it is easy to understand why Whitman’s unconventional political thought has been largely overlooked. Neither aesthetically nor intellectually conventional, it attempted to engage not with educated elites but rather with average people. Add to this his use of crude colloquialisms and frank depictions of sex, and one can understand why most scholars have seen his thinking as contributing little to the canon of political theory. This study attempts to correct this oversight. Arguing that Whitman did more than respond to the political events of his time, it looks at the concepts of identity, political renewal, and internationalism as he wrote about them throughout his career, finding that they were united by his understanding of political culture as a site of normative political theory. The “New World,” he wrote, summing up his work in “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads,” “needs poems of realities and science and of the democratic average and basic equality.”

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In spite of a lack of interest among political theorists, Whitman’s work has long been an object of study. Beginning even before his death, close friends, admirers, and opponents began publishing comments concerning the poet; however, these works were universally biased, and to the extent they mentioned his political thought, it was either to praise or excoriate his support of a broadly nationalistic Americanism. Shortly after his death and the publication of copious material from his notes, letters, and reminiscences, book length treatments of his life and work began appearing, many of them published by his close associates. Most of these works also retained a polemical tone and similarly indistinct notion of the poet as a supporter of American democracy. Gay Wilson Allen published the first modern biography of Whitman in 1955; by considering the poet’s life and work in a thematic and chronological manner, he avoided the personal and ideological biases that plagued earlier works. Since then, a number of fine biographies and book length treatments of his life and work have been published. Among them, works by Justin Kaplan and Paul Zweig used his manuscripts and notebooks to present a

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more complete picture of Whitman apart from his literary career, including his political attachments. David Reynolds described Whitman’s project as fundamentally in conversation with historical events, depicting the poet himself as directly engaged in controversies of the day. As such, he was among the first to recognize how Whitman’s overt interest in politics was reflected in his poetry and prose. Jerome Loving, on the other hand, explored Whitman’s personal life, describing his journey as an author and explaining the celebratory and self-conscious creation of his image as a person and a writer. But he also takes an even-handed look at many of the controversial issues in his life – issues that were political in a larger sense – specifically his sexuality, his stance on slavery and race, and his complicated relationship with his family.

Although many studies recognize Whitman’s democratic attachments in passing, academic interest in his political thought is a relatively recent phenomenon. As early as 1941, F.O. Matthiessen described him as “the central figure in our literature affirming the democratic faith.” But it was only in his *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, published in 1973, that Wilson Carey McWilliams began to treat Whitman as a political theorist in his own right, describing his conception of fraternity as creating “a perfect unity of selves”


that subsumed individuality into a totalizing personality. By the 1980s, Samuel Beer was questioning the relationship between diversity and republican unity in Whitman’s work, and Philip Fischer was using him to argue that the foundations of national unity in America were not the result of a common volk or spirit, but rather the development and spread of American capitalism. By the close of the decade, Betsy Erkkila, writing in her *Whitman: The Political Poet*, had developed the first systematic account of Whitman’s political thought. Covering a number of topics – including slavery, Reconstruction, and homosexuality – she argued that underlying these concepts was a fundamental belief in the sovereignty of the individual as an autonomous being. Nevertheless, it was George Kateb who has been most responsible for the Whitman’s acceptance as a broadly canonical figure in American political theory, developing what has become the dominant interpretation of his thinking. In his work *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*, Kateb investigates the foundations of modern liberalism in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Lumping all three together and labeling them Emersonians, he presents them as idiosyncratic but recognizable liberal individualists. Indeed, Kateb argues that in Whitman “we find in the doctrine of the individual in a

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democracy carried to its idealist perfection.”\textsuperscript{13} Relegating Whitman’s concerns about political community, expressed most clearly in “Song of Myself” and the \textit{Calamus} cluster, to a sidelight, Kateb celebrated Whitman as a thinker completely committed to what he would call democratic individualism.

Since Kateb, Whitman’s political thought has become a more crowded field of study. However, research on the poet’s role in mid-nineteenth century democratic thought has been rare, and Kateb’s work has been directly challenged by only a handful of authors.\textsuperscript{14} Leo Marx questioned Kateb’s libertarian interpretation of the role of religion and capitalism in Whitman’s work.\textsuperscript{15} Nancy Rosenblum, writing in 1990, chided Kateb for his claim that “our unique and shining selves are democracy’s whole purpose and end, and individualism is the real force preserving democracy.”\textsuperscript{16} Michael Mosher makes the most direct argument against Kateb, claiming that he blatantly overlooks the poet’s radical communitarianism.\textsuperscript{17} While none of these challenges have overturned Kateb’s democratic individualism, Whitman’s influence as a canonical figure in American political thought has continued to grow. Both Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty have

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 78.


\textsuperscript{15} Leo Marx, “George Kateb’s Ahistorical Emersonianism,” \textit{Political Theory} 18 (1990), 595-600.


identified him as a principal theorist of American democracy.\textsuperscript{18} And Jason Frank has argued that Whitman sought to create an “aesthetic democracy” in which his poetry engendered a robust participatory politics.\textsuperscript{19} More recently, the scholarship of Whitman’s political thought has expanded substantially with the publication of an edited volume by John Seery that reinvestigates Kateb’s conception of democratic individualism in light of the poet’s work on the nation, life in the city, and death.\textsuperscript{20}

This work builds on the insights of these scholars by expanding on Whitman as political theorist in his own right. In doing so, it challenges interpretations that present the poet as a largely static thinker. \textsuperscript{21} Whitman’s political project did not spring forth from him fully formed. Instead his thinking and writing developed over the course mid-nineteenth century, a tumultuous period during which he was not only a poet but also a teacher, printer, newspaper editor, carpenter, reporter, wound dresser, government clerk, and finally a semi-invalid following a stroke. Respecting the development of Whitman as a thinker, this work will proceed chronologically, working from his first editions of \textit{Leaves of Grass} written between 1855 and 1860 to his late poetry and prose published

\begin{thebibliography}{99}


\bibitem{3} John Seery, ed., \textit{A Political Companion to Walt Whitman} (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).

\end{thebibliography}
after the war. This approach is designed to capture Whitman’s thought at its most mature, allowing an in depth look at the topics of identity, political renewal, and internationalism.

Chapter One focuses on the concept of identity in Whitman’s prewar poetry. In contrast to interpretations that present him as either individualist or nationalist, it attempts to bring together these two seemingly disparate points of view in a mutually constructive conception of political identity that I call poetic nationalism. Whitman claimed that people and communities are not defined only once and for all time. On the contrary, they are created like works of art and, as such, are constantly under critical revision in response to both personal introspection and political interactions. The chapter describes how over the course of the first three editions of Leaves of Grass, specifically the 1855 “Song of Myself” and the 1860 Chants Democratic and Calamus clusters, Whitman locates the foundation for American identity in this autopoetic process. Through it, he saw the potential for the creation of a political love that would transform America from a disconnected collection of individuals into a grand political union.

Chapter Two follows the impact of the Civil War on Whitman’s work. Using his later prose, especially the 1871 Democratic Vistas, it recognizes the postwar years as a critical moment in Whitman’s democratic thought. Bringing him face-to-face with the nation’s dissolution, the failures of the war and Reconstruction prompted him to abandon the optimism of the 1855 Leaves of Grass and adopt a critical realism more appropriate to the political turmoil of the time. The chapter suggests that Whitman develops a logic of analysis similar to civic republican critics of popular rule, in which he calls for a new political ethic to correct the course of democratic decline. Understanding this logic helps situate Whitman’s apparently undemocratic solutions to democracy’s problems, including
most notably the empowering of literary elites with what he called “despotic” powers, into his broader democratic thought. Rather than a rejection of democracy, his proposals are intended to revitalize it by establishing a new class of leaders whose sole purpose was to inculcate a democratic culture that would reinforce the capacity for self-rule.

Chapter Three focuses on Whitman’s late democratic thought as he moved beyond his intensely nationalistic early work to a more internationalist political vision premised on new communication and transportation technologies. Considering Whitman’s idealism in light of materialist themes in his postwar work, this chapter explores his vision of a global cultural cosmopolitanism that he saw being brought about by the power of industrial progress. Admittedly, Whitman’s vision was rooted in the American experience, and therefore has implicitly imperialist foundations. But his project was internationalist in nature, seeking to transcend the nation in favor of an understanding of politics consisting of global communities united by a shared cosmopolitan culture. The chapter discusses the connections between nationalist and internationalist themes in his later works, describing his thought on the global implications of American democracy. It concludes by suggesting some of the implications of Whitman’s internationalist vision for American political thought in today’s rapidly globalizing world.

Although each of these chapters explores dimensions of Whitman’s thought separated by decades, they all recognize his consistent faith in the power of artistic works to shape democratic culture. From his first major poetic publication, *Leaves of Grass*, to his deathbed conversations with Horace Traubel, he saw in his work the ability to transcend the written word and bring about real political change. As a political theorist,
he saw himself as the creator of a new democratic culture, first for Americans and then for others across the globe. Ultimately his goal was nothing less than to usher in a new world in which all relationships were characterized by the democratic virtues of freedom and equality.
Walt Whitman, Poetic Nationalism, and the Affective Character of Democratic Identity

Walt Whitman is among the most enthusiastic democrats in American literature. Certainly no other author celebrated the spirit of democracy as explicitly and energetically as he did, a fact recognized even by his contemporaries. Thus despite his occasional expressions of distaste for the poet and his work, Henry David Thoreau claimed that Whitman was the “greatest democrat the world has ever seen.”\(^1\) To these accolades, recent scholars have begun to recognize his centrality to American democratic theory. Thus George Kateb has described him as the “greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy.”\(^2\) Even more, some have come to see Whitman as a theorist of democratic identity, whose expansive poetry and prose captured and defined the individual and national character in America’s emerging democracy.\(^3\) Indeed, by depicting himself as the embodiment of that democratic experience, he has been seen as

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creating the very concept of democratic identity itself. As Ezra Pound put it, Whitman “is America.”

Whitman’s thinking about political identity has traditionally been understood as either individualistic or nationalistic in nature. As early as 1973, Wilson Carey McWilliams, in his *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, identified the poet as a proponent of a “grandiose individualism,” being nothing more than “a prophet of himself, not of fraternity.” However, it was not until the 1990s and the work of George Kateb – who cast Whitman as staunch defender of individual rights – that he came to be considered an idiosyncratic but recognizably liberal political theorist in his own right. Kateb flatly denies the importance of the nation in the poet’s work, claiming that “Whitman’s greatness does not lie in his pursuit of an image of a democratic American nationality.” Instead, he presents him as a liberal democrat whose individualism ultimately overpowers his nationalism. In recent years, Whitman’s individualism has been reaffirmed by Jason Frank with his radically democratic interpretation of the poet’s thought. Frank sees Whitman’s commitment to democracy in the fleeting, ephemeral interactions of the urban street, claiming that “the promiscuity of the urban encounter among anonymous strangers provides the experiential and affective basis for his dramatic reimagining of political

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attachment.” Although deeply democratic, Frank’s model of political attachment is premised on an understanding of the individual that remains at its heart thoroughly individualistic.

By contrast, other scholars have focused on the role of the community and national unity in Whitman’s political thought. Beginning in 1989, Betsy Erkkila argued that Whitman’s speaker in Leaves of Grass cannot be understood as an individual. Instead “it is like the union, many in one,” and his political attachments rest in a notion of community that is intricately interconnected through homoerotic love. Similarly, Nancy Rosenblum has claimed that the liberal interpretation suggested by Kateb ignores any affective element that would hold a society together. Echoing Burke’s praise of monarchical plumage, she focuses on the power of democracy to create unity through the spectacle of diversity. For Whitman, she writes, the attraction of democracy “is not to other men and women personally and individually, as Kateb has it, but to the extravagant spectacle in which unique individualists exhibit themselves in dazzling display.” More recently, Christina Beltrán has expanded on Rosenblum’s notion of the affective spectacle as the foundation of communities, arguing that “Whitman’s conjoining language of juxtaposition and fusion articulates new practices of identification that


support democratic forms of equality, identification, and solidarity.”\(^{11}\) And Martha Nussbaum has envisioned Whitman’s work as contributing to a fundamentally egalitarian community based on the erotic and affective ties of homosociality.\(^{12}\)

Although most who write about Whitman’s conception of political identity have ignored the extent to which individualism and nationalism are intrinsically intertwined, some have recognized the relationship between these two ideas as constitutive of the poet’s broader thought. Michael Mosher, for example, in his critique of Kateb’s individualistic interpretation, argues that in addition to Whitman’s individualism, there is a “Jacobin” nationalism implicit in his thinking that cannot be ignored. Mosher claims that the poet’s project is, in fact, to recognize both the merits of individualism, as Kateb suggests, and the serious danger of its excesses, something Kateb ignores.\(^{13}\) Similarly, Wilfred M. McClay claims that the relationship between the individual and the nation was central to Whitman’s understanding life in America. “In a word,” says McClay, “the relationship between individualism and nationalism revealed in Whitman was intense, but complex. His effort to hold the two together demonstrated their inevitable tension. The characteristics of a radically independent selfhood could not preclude the old paradigm of self-sacrifice; indeed, in Whitman’s case, the seemed paradoxically to give impetus to

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it.”\textsuperscript{14} Morton Schoolman also recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of the self and community in Whitman’s work, calling his “simple separate person” … merely the ostensible beginning of his work.”\textsuperscript{15} More recently, Jeffery Stout has recognized the relationship between people and their communities as essentially reciprocal. “The premise of Whitman’s social criticism is that character and society are reciprocally related,” he asserts. “We bear responsibility both for society’s current condition, which would have been otherwise if we had had different virtues and vices, and for its future condition, which will depend on what we make of ourselves today and tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{16} Yet Stout does not explore the implications of this notion of identity in any detail, focusing instead on the relationship between character and piety in the works of Whitman and other American political writers.

Ultimately all of these interpretations fail to fully capture Whitman’s conception of democratic identity, for his political thought relies on neither a conception of individualism consonant with traditional liberalism nor a collectivism that reduces people to products of the communities that they inhabit. Instead it serves to connect the individual to the collective in a mutually constructive conception of political identity that I will call poetic nationalism. Attempting to bring these two seemingly disparate points of view together, poetic nationalism proposes that neither people nor communities are

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Wilfred M. McClay, \textit{The Masterless: Self & Society in Modern America} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 73.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Morton Schoolman, \textit{Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality} (New York: Routledge, 2001), 208.
\end{itemize}
defined only once and for all time. On the contrary, they are created like works of art and, as such, are constantly under critical revision in response to both personal introspection and political interaction. Through the course of the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, specifically the 1855 “Song of Myself” and the 1860 *Chants Democratic* and *Calamus* clusters, Whitman locates the foundation of American identity in this autopoetic process. Through it, he sees the potential for the creation of a political love that would transform America from a disconnected collection of individuals into a community of shared political purpose.

*Poetic Nationalism*

Whitman’s poetic nationalism originates in his criticism of American culture. Whereas history, religion, tradition, and language had united European countries by creating a shared sense of national self, he claimed culture in the United States was still too slavishly bound to Old World traditions to provide the foundation for an independent political identity. Created by immigrants, America represented a new type of political community, a “teeming nation of nations,” with its own problems and solutions that must be envisioned independent from the social structure and literary inheritance of the Old World. As such, American identity is constantly under revision, the product of an endless process of self-determination that he likened to artistic creation. Constantly engaged in its own making, Whitman’s America was a poem writ large. “The Americans

17 The dialogue of American exceptionalism in which Whitman participates runs through America political thought. Since before the founding era, Americans have been concerned with the nation’s identity and its relationship to the Old World. Whitman certainly recognized America’s distinctiveness in the form of its political institutions; however, he believed that American culture was largely derivative of European and thus bound to Old World social traditions. See James W. Ceaser, “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism;” Peter S. Onuf, “American Exceptionalism and National Identity, *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 1 (2012): 3-27; 77-99.

of all nations at any time upon the earth,” he claimed boldly in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, “have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”

Central to the concept of poetic nationalism is the idea of reciprocity. Proposing an identity that is highly interactive, Whitman depicts people as both creators and created, mutually constructed by the communities in which they live. Donald Pease likens this facet of Whitman’s ontology to a linguistic “middle voice” distinct from both active and passive ones. The “middle voice,” Pease argues, characterizes the self as a liminal figure that both acts and is acted upon. Standing between activity and receptivity, Whitman’s speaker in *Leaves of Grass* develops a conception of the self characterized by the activity of *poiesis*, one that recognizes identity, both individual and national, as a product of continual construction and reconstruction. At the heart of the concept is a process of creation and transformation. In his *Symposium*, Plato associates it with biological reproduction and the growth of virtue in the soul. Martin Heidegger described the concept as a “bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom in itself.” For Whitman, *poiesis* describes the act of literary creation through which individuals and nations were brought forth in the same dynamic process.

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19 Ibid., iii.


23 In a similar vein, Stephen John Mack, in his work *The Pragmatic Whitman*, argues that *Leaves of Grass* is premised on a conception of creation the likens the United States to the cosmos. “If we take
the relationship between the people and the nation as fundamentally self-constructive, Whitman’s work can be read as an attempt to conceptualize a new foundation for the nation, one that recognizes the centrality of political engagement and love in the creation of a uniquely American identity.

“Song of Myself” and Creation of the Democratic Self

Published first in 1855 but revised throughout Whitman’s life, “Song of Myself” is a bold depiction of the composite nature of the self and its relationship to the nation as a whole. Through the speaker, Whitman develops his conception of poetic nationalism, depicting life in America as a creative, democratic experience. Paul Zweig called “Song of Myself” “an engine of self-making” that “enacts Whitman’s birth as a poet.” As a work of political theory, it also describes a process of national self-making, wherein a people is given birth through the body of the speaker. Beginning with the opening lines of the poem, Whitman asserts a radical equivalence of social substance shared by all Americans, a sentiment that ultimately suffuses the whole work. “I celebrate myself,” he exclaims, highlighting the relationship between the individual and the speaker, “And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to

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seriously the idea that the universe we are a part of is still in the making, then we must consider it likely that we, too, are in the process of self-creation. … The name we have for that process of continuous self-creation on a collective level is liberal democracy.” Stephen John Mack, The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 47-48.

24 “Song of Myself” is the final iteration in a long series of names for this piece. Like all poems in 1855, it was untitled; however, it has also been titled “Walt Whitman, an America,” and simply “Walt Whitman” before the author settled on “Song of Myself.” To simplify matters, this chapter will refer to all of his poems in the 1855 edition by their final names.

In these sweeping lines, the speaker asserts a radical mutuality between his/herself and the reader based on the sharing of “atoms.” The importance of the claim is recognized by Kateb, who argues that Whitman’s use of the word “atom” refers to the “potentiality” of every person to become any other. According to Kateb, identification with this possibility encourages individuals to think of themselves in the position of others, but imparts no obligation to the community as such. This interpretation fundamentally misconstrues Whitman’s use of the atom, and hence misunderstands the nature of the relationship between people and their communities in his work. In the science of Whitman’s time, an atom did not signify a potentiality; in fact, it was precisely the opposite, representing the smallest discrete particle of matter, and Whitman was aware of this fact. The distinction is important because the poet uses the scientific concept of the atom to make a statement about America’s collective identity. It is possible for one to “assume” as he does because deep down people who are part of the same nation possess the same social matter, making them fundamentally similar. By beginning the poem in this manner, Whitman announces his intention to outline a theory of identity that is based on the commonality between people. Drawing on additional scientific imagery, he likens the experience of community in the United States to a vapor


27 Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 244.

28 While the theory of the atom was generally accepted by scientists in the 1850s, having been confirmed by the work of French chemists Anton Lavoisier, Joseph Louis Proust, and Englishman John Dalton in the late Eighteenth Century, much of the uncertainty in atomic theory caused by the introduction of the nucleus and elementary particles did not come about until the early twentieth century with the work of Ernest Rutherford and Werner Heisenberg. In Whitman’s time, it was commonly held that an atom is the smallest, indivisible particle of matter. For more on Whitman’s understanding of science see Joseph Beaver, *Walt Whitman – Poet of Science* (Morningside Heights, NY: King’s Crown Press, 1951); David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 235-251.
the gaseous phase of room temperature liquid – that permeates and caresses everyone, completely surrounding and suffusing the self. “The atmosphere is not a perfume,” he continues, “it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever …. I am in love with it, / … I am mad for it to be in contact with me.”

Whitman develops his theory of poetic nationalism through two distinct but related metaphors deployed through the remainder of “Song of Myself.” First, he explores the constructedness of political community by depicting the speaker as the figurative embodiment of the people, drawing the inhabitants of the United States into his physical body. By uniting them in this manner as a symbolic act of nation building, Whitman shows how people come together to create the composite identity of the nation. Second, this speaker – now composed of the individuals who make up the nation – identifies the American people with his words, becoming the locus of the shared experiences that comprise community belonging. Through the development of this dualistic image of the embodied speaker-as-nation – a development that takes the whole of this long poem – Whitman outlines the reciprocal relationship between the nation and the individual. By becoming the literal embodiment of the people, the speaker of “Song of Myself” represents the crucible of poetic nationalism, the poiesis of self and nation.

After introducing the collective nature of individual identity, “Song of Myself” turns to a radical apotheosis of the speaker. At first completely without form, body, or gender, the speaker is an unaccompanied voice in the dark. Gradually gaining features through the first third of poem, the speaker accrues more than a single identity, claiming

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to be “of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise … Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man, / Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine. / … A southerner soon as a northerner, / ... a Hoosier, a Badger and a Buckeye.”

Combining many, the speaker becomes a representation of the nation itself. “These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,” says the speaker, recognizing the social body that has coalesced within itself. “If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing, / If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing.”

Although Whitman suggests universality in his representation of those in all lands, the nationality of the speaker is clearly conveyed through the references to “Hoosiers,” “Badgers,” and “Buckeyes” in the previous stanza. By encompassing Americans from across the nation, the speaker becomes a site of continual combination and creation, the body from which the nation is given birth. “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world. / Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, / … Always a knit of identity …. Always distinction …. Always a breed of life.”

From the plural identity of the embodied nation, the speaker envisions a new kind of political agent, one who is both individualistic and interconnected. Constantly engaged in poietic activity, this newly created actor has the potential to recognize the dense interconnections between people in the free system of association that is Whitman’s America. Likening the concept of the embodied nation to the actions of great chorus, he depicts each person contributing a voice, but the music is produced as an ensemble. “I

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30 Ibid., 23.
31 Ibid., 24.
32 Ibid., 14.
hear the sound of the human voice …. a sound I love,” he goes on, “sounds of the city and sounds out of the city / Talkative young ones to those that like them …. the recitative of fish-peddars and fruit-peddars …. the loud laugh of workpeople at their meals, / … I hear the chorus …. it is a grand-opera …. this indeed is music!”\(^{33}\) The image of the chorus – in which many are united in one sound – is analogous to the first stage in Whitman’s development of poetic nationalism. The people are brought together, creating a common political identity. Just as a chorus is made of many engaged in a shared effort, so too is the nation composed of individuals who sing together, working towards the goals of a national union. “I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,” Whitman writes, describing the nation. “Every kind for itself and its own …. For me mine male and female, / … For me children and the begetters of children. / Who need be afraid of the merge?”\(^{34}\)

While the speaker of “Song of Myself” was initially disembodied, a voice without form, as the nation comes into focus throughout the first third of the poem, it gains recognizable features – first sense organs, then limbs, and finally a body. This incremental identification of the speaker culminates in his revelation as “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.”\(^{35}\) Coexistent with and symbolic of the nation itself, Whitman describes himself as an egalitarian figure, providing powerful justification for the democratic character of this newly conceived nation. Just as he amalgamated the great and the wretched in the body of the speaker, so too must a nation

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 31-32.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 29.
include in its construction both the powerful and the lowly. “Through me many long
dumb voices,” he exults, identifying the people of America. “Voices of interminable
generations of slaves, / Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons, / … Voices
indecent by me clarified and transfigured.”  
Echoing the Eucharistic image of Christ’s body, Whitman claims that through his divine poetic form, Americans are transformed into one body. By including the prostitute, the slave and the indecent, he admits all people into the nation, enjoining Americans to understand that through their inclusion in a social body, even those regarded as the lowest in society are redeemed. Those who participate in the nation, those who truly become Americans, cannot help but be sanctified through their inclusions in the divinity of the speaker.  
“Divine am I inside and out,” he continued, “and I make holy whatever I touch and am touched from. / … Translucent mould of me it shall be you.”  

“Song of Myself” shifts after Whitman’s revelation as speaker. Up to this point, he had united the nation symbolically in his body. Now he describes how individuals are constructed through their membership and participation in the nation. From his position as many-in-one, Whitman depicts himself giving birth to the citizens of a new nation. “But my life-lumps! becoming already a creator!,” he writes, referring to his ambiguously gendered national self as a site of procreation. “Putting myself here and now to the

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36 Ibid., 39.  
37 Whitman’s personal religion is difficult to discern from his work. While he had roots in Hicksite Quakerism through his mother – he describes seeing Elias Hicks in his youth in – he never committed to an organized religion as an adult. However, his beliefs consisted of elements of both Transcendental spirituality and traditional civic religions, including the conception of the soul and the divine as ephemeral extra-personal forces combined with an assertion of the holiness of the body politic. See David Kuebrich, Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman’s New American Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 175-192.  
38 Ibid., 29-30 [My emphasis].
ambushed womb of the shadows! / … Come my children.”³⁹ With the identification of
his “ambushed womb of shadows,” Whitman presents himself as the expectant mother of
his fellow citizens, pregnant with the potentiality of their identities. As the symbol of
American identity, he uses his voice to give birth to the people, speaking the nation into
existence. “My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With the twirl of my tongue
I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds. / Speech is the twin of my vision …. it is
unequal to measure itself.”⁴⁰

Whitman explores the individual component of poetic nationalism with two more
related images. In each, he uses suffering to bear witness to the individuality of the
subject. The depiction of pain is an ideal means to distinguish the individual from the
collective identity. It is an inherently individuating experience. While it is possible to
sympathize with the pain of another, it cannot be transferred or felt except directly.
Beginning with the scene of a terrible steamboat crash, he recognizes disintegration of a
group into its individual members. “How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless
wreck of the steamship,” he writes, describing the disaster. “How the lank loose-gowned
women looked when boated from the side of their prepared graves, / How the silent old-
face infants, and the lifted sick, and the sharp-lipped unshaved men; / … I am the man
… I suffered … I was there.”⁴¹ Though many, each figure bears the burdens of private
suffering, complete in their pain. In the image of the dead – those who were “bloated
from the side of their prepared graves” – the poet comments on the holistic nature of

³⁹ Ibid., 46.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 31.
⁴¹ Ibid., 39.
identity. Individuality emerges from the shared experience, but without something to unite people together, human life remains ever fragmentary and incomplete. Shifting the scene, Whitman expands on the concept of suffering as a means of individuation by focusing on the image of the slave. “I am the hounded slave,” he wrote. “I wince at the bite of dogs, / Hell and despair are upon me …. crack and again crack the marksmen, / … Agonies are one of my changes of garments.”42 This image depicts the extreme example of the person whose individuality is defined by nationally imposed suffering. Spun out here from the embodied nation is a subject who is completely constrained, defined almost entirely by the power that enslaves him. Although Whitman believed that the nation had the potential to foster freedom and equality, he also recognized a corresponding power to enslave and dominate.

Moving beyond these examples, Whitman generalizes this conception of individual identity while increasing the tempo of the poem. Depicting many people in rapid succession, he extends the metaphor of the embodied speaker, making himself a fundamentally creative force who spins out citizens from his national body in a dizzying list:

The young mechanic is closest to me …. He knows me pretty well,
The woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day,
The farmboy ploughing in the fields feels good at the sound of my voice,
… I go with fisherman and seamen, and love them,
My face rubs to the hunter’s face when he lets down alone in his blanket,
The driver thinking of me does not mind the jolt of his wagon,

42 Ibid., 39.
The young mother and the old mother shall comprehend me,
The girl and the wife rest the needle a moment and forget where they are,
They and all would resume what I have told them.\textsuperscript{43}

In this passage, the poet steps back, attempting to represent a broad cross-section of the population as opposed to intense depictions of a few. Whereas before he had directly identified with those in his work – claiming, in fact, to be them – here he admits the inherent distances that must separate people, positioning himself as their true friend and countryman, a companion who walks beside them. There is a gap between people that cannot be wholly bridged, and in the end walking alongside another is the best option. “Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself. / … Shoulder your duds, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth; / Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.”\textsuperscript{44} While Whitman sees Americans as bound together by something deeply durable and powerful – a fact he asserts repeatedly throughout the poem – there are limits to unity.

For Whitman, the goal of poetry was not to authoritatively teach people how to live, nor, as McWilliams suggested, to turn people into copies of himself that he could narcissistically love.\textsuperscript{45} Whitman’s main goal in “Song of Myself” and the rest of the 1855 edition of \textit{Leaves of Grass} is to make the relationships between people clear, allowing them to recognize the nationality that arises from amongst them. “Askers embody

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{45} McWilliams, 407-421.
themselves in me,” he wrote of the people, “and I am embodied in them.” Identity is not a constant but rather a constantly changing variable through which we are bound together socially and politically. “Song of Myself” helps his readers realize this fact, and in so doing recognizes what is common in each other as a means of personal and national salvation. “Whoever walks a furlong without sympathy,” he warns, “walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud.”

Politic

Political Love and the Affective Limitations of Poetic Nationalism

Whitman’s process of revising Leaves of Grass reflects the continual evolution his political thought as he engaged with the events of his time. Just as the 1855 edition addresses his fears about union in the face of the growing discord surrounding the extension of slavery into the territories, his 1860 shift to an explicit rhetoric of love as a means to instill affective unity can be read as a logical response to the nation’s impending descent into Civil War. While the poetic nationalism of “Song of Myself” traces the deep interconnections between Americans, by the late 1850’s Whitman was searching for a more durable source of attachment, mobilizing a comprehensive conception of political love that could reconcile his earlier thought with the affective demands of a modern nation-state. At its heart, the poet’s turn towards love recognizes the incompleteness of his previous poetic nationalism, and it expands on it. “What is it, then, between us?” he asks a stranger on a ferry, framing his concern about political unity. “What is the count of

46 Whitman, Leaves of Grass (1855), 43.
47 Ibid., 53.
the scores or hundreds of years between us?”

His answer to this question – developed through his remaining antebellum work – recognizes political love as a foundation for unity more important than even the political ties of the Constitution. “I hear it is charged against me that I seek to destroy institutions;” he answered to his critics, “But really I am neither for or against institutions, / … Only I will establish, in Mannahatta and in every city of These States, / … Without edifices, or rules, or trustees, or any argument, / The institution of the dear love of comrades.”

Interpretations of Whitman’s understanding of political attachment in the pre-war era generally revolve around two distinct conceptions of love: amative homosocial love and adhesive filial love. Betsy Erkkila claims Whitman’s homoerotic focus on the connection created by the implied act of intercourse serves as an analogue for the poet’s desire for a political system based in manly love. “Whitman sought to reconnect his private homosexual feeling with the public culture of democracy,” she writes in *Whitman: The Political Poet*, “expressing a separatist impulse toward a private homosexual order at the same time [he] invoke[s] a national and global community of democratic brotherhood. … from ‘pleasures, profits, conformities,’ – toward a more spiritual order of democratic comradeship and love.”

Michael Moon also considers Whitman’s depictions of homosexual love as bringing the reader, the poet, and ultimately the people into a closer, more intimate relationship. “The text first impels its readers into contact with abjection, and then delivers them into contact with the supposedly saving

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affectionate physical presence of the author.”\textsuperscript{52} Although these interpretations conflate the act of sexual love with the affective component that creates unity, they recognize in Whitman’s work a desire to seek an affective solution for an essentially political problem.\textsuperscript{53} By contrast, Kateb recognizes the filial conception of love as a basis for an “attach[ment] to earthly existence as such.”\textsuperscript{54} Although he explicitly rejects the language of Whitman’s adhesiveness, Kateb claims that the poet’s use of love “translates public into nonpublic, carrying public lessons from the political system into the spiritual and practical life outside it.”\textsuperscript{55} For his part, David Bromwich challenges Kateb’s dismissal of brotherly love, recognizing in Whitman’s poetry a vision of unity premised on a multiplicity of people engaged in a shared enterprise. Using modern cinema as an analogy, Bromwich explains Whitman’s adhesiveness as the connectedness borne by the cinematic experience or the “‘panoramic sleight’ … stress[ing] the importance to Whitman of certain common sentiments, that is, feelings, the impression of which is associated with other people who have them as well.”\textsuperscript{56}

While these interpretations identify the political nature of Whitman’s conception of love, they fail to recognize its multifaceted, \textit{poietic} character. Describing love as

\textsuperscript{52} Moon, 69. See also, Peter Coviello, “Intimate Nationality: Anonymity and Attachment in Whitman,” \textit{American Literature} 73 (2001): 85-119.

\textsuperscript{53} While most scholars understand these two concepts to be distinct and independent from one another, Michael Lynch argued that that Whitman coopts the language of phrenology in order to transform adhesiveness – which originally designated both same and opposite sex friendships – into a model for a love that would ultimately come to be called homosexual. Michael Lynch, “‘Here Is Adhesiveness’: From Friend to Homosexuality,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 29 (1985): 67-96.

\textsuperscript{54} Kateb, \textit{The Inner Ocean}, 156.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 161.

neither adhesive nor amative, Whitman wove many different kinds—erotic, filial, and agapeistic—together in his poetic works in order to present a cohesive model for the bonds that can unite a nation. “Alone I had thought—yet soon a silent troop gathers around me,” he wrote, describing his relationship to the people who followed his work. “Some walk by my side, and some behind, and some embrace my arms or neck, / They, the spirits of friends, dead or alive,–thicker they come, a great crowd, and I in the middle.”\(^{57}\) For Whitman, poetry was an explicitly political act, aimed at creating a community united through love. Recognizing that love is more complicated than most poets admit, however, he presents many different forms of it in the same passage. Thus some walk beside Whitman as brothers, while others clutch at his arms and neck as lovers. Still others wait behind and watch the scene from a distance, suggesting the love of the poet for the nation. Central to his prewar work is the way that Whitman conceptualizes love as a basis for the constitutive bond of the nation. “Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and bards,” he wrote. “Where the city stands that is beloved by these, and loves them in return, and understands them, / Where these may be seen going every day in the streets, with their arms familiar to the shoulders of their friends.”\(^{58}\)

The Chants Democratic and Calamus clusters of the 1860 Leaves of Grass present a unique opportunity to study the poet’s mobilization of love as a component of poetic nationalism.\(^{59}\) Not only do these works contain Whitman’s least censored poems

\(^{57}\) Whitman, Leaves of Grass (1860), 347.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{59}\) The Chants Democratic and Calamus clusters consist of twenty-one and forty-five poems respectively. Although some of the individual poems were published previously—such as his 1855 “Song
regarding his own sexuality and conception of love, they also are the most explicitly political works he would ever publish. In them, the dense interconnections of poetic nationalism that he developed throughout the first edition in 1855 become the avenue through which he could infuse his great personal love into the political relationships of the nation. Returning to the language of the 1855 “Preface” in the first poem of Chants Democratic, he links his earlier thought to the idea of political love. “These States are the ampler poem,” he reiterates. “Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations, / … Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combative ness, the Soul loves, / Here the flowing trains—here the crowds, equality, diversity, the Soul loves.” These poetic clusters represent Whitman’s attempt to forestall the Civil War though his poetry. In them, he explores love as not just an affective or personal experience but as a means of creating political connections, the means to maintain a nation. “I will sing the song of companionship,” he wrote in his 1860 “Proto-Leaf,” a preface work. “I will show what alone must compact These, / I believe These are to found their own ideal of manly love, indicating it in me.” In the process of developing this idea, Whitman depicts three basic types of love as models for political attachment in a democratic society. First, in the erotic encounter, he sees more than a purely physical act, recognizing the potentiality for love – even between strangers – as a means of connection. Second, he elucidates a more attached model of connection as a source of national unity in his depictions of filial love.

of Occupations,” which was “3” in 1860 – their inclusion in these new groupings that so self-consciously focus on the concept of love invites new interpretation.

60 Moon, 132-133.

61 Whitman, Leaves of Grass (1860), 111 [My emphasis].

62 Ibid., 10.
Finally, he describes the unconditional agapeistic love that he felt as the national poet as a model for the potential of the American nation united under his vision.

In both his time and now, Whitman’s depictions of erotic love were controversial, not only due to their homoeroticism but also because of the frankness with which he approached the topic of sexuality. Focusing on the experiential nature of sex unbounded by heteronormative expectations, he celebrates its potential for a connection that admits any and all into a close union. “One flitting glimpse, caught through an interstice,” he wrote, spotting a potential intimate across a bar. “Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room, / … Of a youth who loves me, and whom I love, silently approaching, and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand; / …There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.”63 From this “phenomenology of cruising,” as it was described by Michael Warner, Whitman creates a model of attachment in a modern democratic society where human connection is expanded to its greatest potential.64 In contrast to Frank, who sees in the ephemerality of Whitman’s erotics a model of democratic theory, Whitman saw in erotic love a profound openness to connection between strangers, and in that contention, a potential for a meaningful attachment. “Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,” he wrote. “I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you, / … You grew up with me,

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63 Ibid., 371.

were a boy with me, or a girl with me, / I ate with you, and slept with you—your body has become not yours only, nor left my body mine only.”

In the radical openness to experience signaled by Whitman’s erotics, the poet saw the power to reconstruct the nation in a way that recognizes the diverse conditions of modern politics. Although Whitman would agree with Benedict Anderson’s famous argument that the American nation is imagined in the sense most people can share no direct relationship with others across the country, he would argue that the nation is not created in the mind so much as the heart. Connecting the passion of personal love to the diffuse love of a nation, he describes it spreading across America like a fire: “Not these – O none of these, more than the flames of me, consuming, burning for his love whom I love! / … Wafted in all directions, O love, for friendship, for you.” Whitman’s turn to erotic love as a model for attachment gives him the symbolism he needs to bridge the gap between unknown people. By conceptualizing the connective power of love as openness to encounter, he asks that all people be open to attachment when it is available, creating a nation that is comprised of a constantly changing web of connections that crosses the country. “Think of loving and being loved,” he enjoined to his readers; “I swear to you, whoever you are, you can interfuse yourself with such things that everybody that sees you shall look longingly upon you.”

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68 Ibid., 173.
Moving from the erotic to the filial, Whitman depicts a second basis for democratic attachment in America in the relationship between close friends and compatriots. Less ephemeral than the erotic encounter, it is a connection based not in kinship ties – as the word would suggest – but shared goals. “Now we start hence, I with the rest, on our journeys through The States,” he wrote. “We willing learners of all, teachers of all, and lovers of all. / … We confer on equal terms with each of The States.”69 In this passage, Whitman recognizes the power of shared activity – be it journeying, teaching, or learning – to create attachments between people. From here, he depicts filial love as a foundation for a more permanent political connection between people. “I will sound myself and comrades only—I will never again utter a call, only their call,” he exclaimed, situating the concept of union in filial love. “I will raise, with it, immortal reverberations through The States, / I will give an example to lovers, to take permanent shape and will through The States.”70 Claiming that the fundamental problem with the nation in the years before the Civil War was affective rather than political, he saw in filial love the potential for the American people to come together. “I dreamed that was the new City of Friends;” he wrote, describing an idealized representation of a community of brothers. “Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love – it led the rest, / It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city, / And in all their looks and words.”71

69 Ibid., 190.
70 Ibid., 343.
71 Ibid., 373.
Although Whitman depicts many different conceptions of love as models of connection, filial love is the most conventionally political. Whereas erotic love had the potential to unite strangers, filial love represents a lasting and durable connection between close compatriots, reinforcing and enhancing the political attachments created by the Constitution. Whitman developed this idea in the fifth poem of the *Calamus* cluster, a piece expurgated in all postwar editions of *Leaves of Grass*.

STATES!
Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?
By an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?
Away!
I arrive, bringing these, beyond all the forces of courts and arms,
These! to hold you together as firmly as the earth itself is
held together.
… Affection shall solve every one of the problems of
freedom,
Those who love each other shall be invincible,
They shall finally make America completely victorious, in
my name.”

The filial love that Whitman proposes here suggests a more developed understanding of political unity than in his earlier thought, a connection premised not only on political institutions but also on affective ties. Whereas erotic love presupposes liberty, filial love points to equality and fraternity. “The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,” he continued. “The continuance of Equality shall be comrades. / These shall tie and band stronger than hoops of iron, / I, extatic, O partners! O lands! henceforth with the love of lovers tie you. / I will make the continent indissoluble.” Whitman’s turn to filial love signals the poet’s desire to found political attachment relationships animated by shared

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72 Ibid., 349.

73 Ibid., 351.
goals and self-understandings rather than political affiliation, birthplace, or happenstance. As a democratic poet, he wrote not to create a certain sort of person but rather one who could inhabit certain sorts of relationships, including those based on filial love. “I plant companionship as thick as trees along the rivers of America,” he continued depicting his self-conceived role as poet. “I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other’s necks. / For you these, from me, O Democracy, to serve you, ma femme!”

The third type of love that Whitman develops in his antebellum work is best described as an unconditional, unquestioning love similar to the Christian concept of agape. As the self-assigned poet of democracy, he conceptualizes love as an all-encompassing attachment not only to the people but to the nation itself. “O you robust, sacred!,” he extolled from on high. “I cannot tell you how I love you; / All I love America for, is contained in men and women like you.” For Whitman, this passage describes a love that transcends individuality. His agape is based not on people’s extrinsic characteristics but on the democratic principles of freedom and equality that they manifest in their relationships with each other. “O mater! O fils! / O brood continental!,” the poet calls out. “O I believe there is nothing real but America and freedom! / O to sternly reject all except Democracy! / … O you coarse and wilful! I love you.” In this unquestioning love lies Whitman’s vision for the salvation of the nation, a vision of people from all walks of life must understand themselves as connected through the attachment they feel to one another. “I have gone freely with powerful uneducated

74 Ibid., 351.
75 Ibid., 157, 158.
76 Ibid., 105-106.
persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families, / ... I reject none, I permit all, / ... Underneath all is the need of the expression of love for men and women."  

As a practical matter, even the perennially sanguine Whitman realized that a political union founded on *agape* was an unattainable goal. Such a love is too vast, too all-encompassing, and too indiscriminate to be altogether human. Nevertheless, Whitman presents it as model for democratic attachment. Indeed, more than that, he celebrates it, making it his model for connection in America. While Whitman’s personal capacity for affection may have been limited by his humanity, as America’s poet he embodies agapeistic love and spreads it, uniting the nation in his heart. “O America, because you build for mankind, I build for you!,” he explained in the first poem of *Chants Democratic*. “By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation.” Despite its too grandiose character, agapeistic love becomes the characteristic activity of the poet-figure of *Calamus* and *Chants Democratic*. Absent a naturally binding affection, it was the role of poets like himself to use their talents and inspiration to provide a model for the nation as united by love. “I will make cities and civilizations defer to me!,” he continued. “(This is what I have learnt

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77 Ibid., 121-122.

78 At times, even Whitman’s attachment to the nation faltered. He admits this fact in two bitter invectives that reflect his frustrations with the trajectory of pre-war United States, “The Eighteenth Presidency,” and “Respondez.” Both written in 1856, these works do not signal the poet’s departure from his project; rather, they recognize that even a thinker who attempted to love a nation as purposively and expansively as Whitman did failed on occasion.

79 Ibid., 114-115.
from America – it is the amount – and I teach again.) / … The Many In One – what is it finally except myself? / These States – what are they except myself?”

The hallmark of Whitman’s conception of political love is the multifaceted way in which he conceptualized intimacy. Neither absolutely amative nor adhesive, the concept is left to the interpretation of readers, allowing them to construct in their mind’s eye both the form of love and the ideal lover. At the same time, however, the speaker of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* is a much more demanding figure than that of “Song of Myself.” Personal and insistent, he attempts to transcend the limitations of the written word to bring his message to his readers. Whitman modeled the intimacy of political relationships in “Chants Democratic 3” by using the speaker as a focal point for a love that would capture everyone, a love that could be instilled only through earnest interaction with him. “Come closer to me,” he enjoined his readers, “Push closer, my lovers, and take the best I possess, / Yield closer and closer, and give me the best you possess. / … I pass so poorly with paper and types, I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.” In effect, the poet steps out of the pages into the press of bodies that constitutes his collected audience. Envisioning his work as truly participatory, Whitman focused on the relationship between the author and the reader as a means of modeling

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80 Ibid., 125.

81 Written in 1855 and later titled, “Song of Occupations,” this poem is an important example of how Whitman reorganized later editions of *Leaves of Grass* as a means to express important changes in his thought. Here a poem of only secondary importance in the greater body of the 1855 edition is moved to the critical *Calamus* cluster to highlight the connective power of love. This new location betokens an opportunity to reinterpret the poem in accordance with the poet’s revised goals.

82 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1860), 143.
political community. “All I love America for, is contained in men and women like you.”83

Although Whitman allowed the reader to construct the form of their relationship with him, he too constructed his ideal readers. By addressing them not as individuals but as a group, he brought together idealized “lovers” and friends, forging them into a community. While reading is generally a solitary practice, he joined his readers not one at a time, but all at once, as indicated in the plural nouns he uses. He addressed them together as “lovers” and makes them so through his work. Playing with the ambiguity of the word “lovers” – its use to designate both close friends and sexual partners was common in the mid-nineteenth century – he hoped not only to create a bond between himself and the reader through their interactions with the speaker, but also to create a relationship between all readers who are invited to interpret his use of the phrase as they each desire. No longer content to unite the people through his body, he wanted them to feel what he felt and love him and each other as fiercely as he did, envisioning them together in a community based on love. With this love, he hoped to transform the people. “O equality! O organic compacts! I am come to be your born poet!,” he called out to the people. “O whirl, contest, sounding and resounding! I am your poet, because I am part of you; / … O you States! Cities! defiant of all outside authority! I spring at once into your arms! you I most love!”84

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83 Ibid., 158.

84 Ibid., 107-108.
Conclusion

Ultimately the central question animating all of Whitman’s early political thought is that of democratic attachment. How do people living in a politically diverse and geographically expansive nation possess the kind of meaningful affection necessary for political unity? The concept of poetic nationalism provides a new way of thinking about this question. By discarding both individualist and nationalist interpretations of his thought, it recognizes the process of reciprocal *poiesis* that underlies Whitman’s view of American identity. People are neither purely autonomous nor completely constructed. Rather they come to life through their interactions and relationships, a process through which people simultaneously construct the nation and are constructed by it.

Yet Whitman’s contribution to American democratic thought rests not in overly sanguine estimations of the affective potential of the people in the United States. In his time, he saw that the essential problem was a lack of awareness of the collective nature of nationalism and a subsequent lack of affection for the nation. It is hard to argue with his analysis. Then and now, the threat of political discord looms; hyper-partisanship has paralyzed Congress, and discontent with elected officials is commonplace. In response, he calls Americans to love one another. He does not believe such love is perfect, without conflict, or easy, but he thinks that the idea of an American nation – created by politics but united through affection, is a project worth pursuing. Moreover, for Whitman a nation exists only as long as its people want it to, as long as they recognize the connections that they share. His poetic nationalism calls us to recognize what makes America, and in so doing strive with love to make it real.
"Canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten:" Walt Whitman and the Logic of Democratic Renewal

The long shadow of the Civil War fell across Walt Whitman in his later years. Bringing the fervidly nationalistic poet face-to-face with the nation’s disintegration, the war had challenged the native optimism of his early works. While the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* attempted to inspire unity in the face of impending disaster, writings produced after that time have a much darker tone. Whitman was well aware of the change, explaining to readers of the 1872 edition that “my Book and the War are one.”¹

More reserved in its optimism, his postwar political thought developed along more critical lines. Seeing a society where sovereignty was increasingly exercised in the name of the people but not by them, and where democracy as a political ideal had all but ceased to exist, he expressed deep misgivings about the state of democratic politics in the United States. Describing the nation as in moral and political decline, he returned to his republican roots, focusing on the need for civic renewal in face of the its near collapse. Nevertheless, while retreating from his earlier sanguine political thought, Whitman did not abandon democracy. Instead, he outlined a program for renewal that would reinvigorate America through the creation of a shared democratic culture.

In examining the need for renewal, Whitman identifies three related problems undermining democratic practice in America. First, he argues that elites, both public and

private, were riddled with corruption, moving beyond simply neglecting their responsibilities to abusing their privileges by serving private rather than public interests. This corruption of democratic leaders was abetted by a growing moral hypocrisy in the citizenry at large, as the gap between the values they expressed and political practices grew wider. Finally, to make matters worse, these changes were compounded by the nation’s soullessness, a weakness that delayed the development of a unifying national identity. Responding to these problems in a manner reminiscent of civic republican critics of popular rule, Whitman redefines the democratic ideal by reconstructing the concept of democratic culture, depicting it as founded in a “Popular Democracy” that recognizes and encourages common emotional, intellectual, and national ties.  

Whitman’s Democracy and the War

Although Whitman is often read as an uncritical champion of American democracy, the truth is far more nuanced. This optimistic interpretation of the poet is based largely on his works written before the Civil War, specifically his 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass. Thus when thinkers like George Kateb, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty recognize Whitman as an American political theorist, they take little care to separate the younger, more optimistic Whitman, from his older, more cautious self.  

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Citing poems written in 1855 alongside prose from as late as 1885, they implicitly argue that Whitman’s thought remained relatively static throughout his career, despite the tumultuous years of the mid-nineteenth century. This interpretive approach lends itself to a depiction of Whitman as a thinker who was consistently uncritical of democracy, ignoring the deep doubts he expressed about it after the war. Admittedly, there have been a number of excellent studies, most notably Michael Moon’s *Disseminating Whitman* and David Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America*, that take care to contextualize Whitman’s life and work.⁴ Both Moon and Reynolds present Whitman as, above all, a dynamic thinker whose work and revisions represent an ongoing conversation between the poet and the events of his time. “The long process of revisionary elaboration that *Leaves of Grass* gradually underwent,” wrote Moon, “produced a series of texts that powerfully articulate a politics comprehending ranges of experience as ostensibly disparate as the pleasurable and painful phases of male homoerotic love … and the national trauma of the sectional division over slavery.”⁵ Yet while both Moon and Reynolds recognize the political nature of the poet’s project, neither of them analyze in depth his democratic thought in the years after the war.

By contrast, Samuel Beer and Doris Sommer distinguish Whitman’s prewar poetry from his postwar prose.⁶ Their interpretations suggest that Whitman had

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⁵ Moon, 3-4.

deepening doubts about American democracy after the war. Neither thinker, however, focuses on these doubts, instead depicting Whitman as a broadly liberal and optimistic political theorist. Continuing in this vein, Betsy Erkkila and Stephen Mack describe the war as the turning point in his career, after which his doubts about democracy become more common in his political thought. 7 “That Whitman should have turned to prose at such a time [after the war],” wrote Mack, “suggests a special anxiety over the complexities and contradiction of American democracy.”8 That said, neither Erkkila nor Mack captures the depth of his disillusionment, depicting the change in his work as a response to a relatively limited set of complaints. The most promising accounts of the role of the war on Whitman’s political thought have been offered by Jeffrey Stout and Patrick Deneen, who see the development of Whitman’s democratic theory as reaching its maturity in his postwar Democratic Vistas, arguing that it was only through the failures he documented in it that his political thought took on a systematic, prescriptive focus.9 “In the face of cynicism,” wrote Deneen, “even despair, about the possibility of a genuine and transformed democratic life, Whitman wrote in large part to renew and deepen the democratic faith, indeed to declare that he would be the first among its new secular prophets.”10


10 Deneen, 98.
This chapter takes up where Stout and Deneen leave off, recognizing in *Democratic Vistas* and other major works written after the Civil War a critical moment in Whitman’s democratic thought. Although the war itself was the most significant event in his life, he published noting of note during it, writing only a few recruitment pieces in newspapers. Thus with the exception of a few letters to his friends and family, there is little first-hand account of its effect on him. However, his postwar elegy, *Drum-Taps*, reveals that he was deeply shaken by his experiences, and the changes to the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* tell an even more compelling story. Gone was the optimistic “Calamus 5,” a poem that promised to “make the continent indissoluble,” replaced by “Tears,” a piece that exudes deep despair.\(^\text{11}\) Moreover, although he still remained a democratic political thinker, Whitman’s later works bear a fundamentally different logic than his earlier ones. The failures of the postwar period prompted him to adopt a critical realism more appropriate to the political turmoil of the time and to advocate a new political ethic to correct the course of democratic decline.

*Democratic Decline*  

Whitman’s experiences ministering to the Civil War wounded brought the naturally gentle poet face-to-face with the horrors of battle, an experience from which he would never fully recover. Writing in his 1865 *Drum-Taps*, he expressed an internal conflict about democracy in the United States where none had existed before. “How the true thunder bellows after the lightning!,” he wrote, describing democracy as destructive and even vindictive, “how bright the flashes of lightning! / How DEMOCRACY, with

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\(^\text{11}\) Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1860), 351.
The conflict about democracy was exacerbated by his impression of the actions of the American people both before and after the war. On the one hand, he remained as fervently committed to the concept as he ever had, seeing the response of Union soldiers to the South’s secession as a powerful symbol of democracy. “The movements of the late secession war,” he wrote, “show that popular democracy, whatever its faults and dangers, practically justifies itself beyond the proudest claims and wildest hopes of its enthusiasts.” On the other, he believed that the practice of democracy had deteriorated to the extent that there was little left to salvage. “Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than at present, here in the United States,” he wrote in 1872. “Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ’d in, … nor is humanity itself believed in.” Having seen Americans at their best during the war – fighting and dying for a national cause – he now saw them as at their worst – scrambling for the petty spoils of a war-torn South. Whitman traces the trajectory of democratic decline and proposes his solution by highlighting three systemic problems that plagued the nation: corruption, hypocrisy, and soullessness.

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14 Ibid., 369.
Corruption

At its heart, Whitman’s narrative of corruption focuses on political and financial leaders turning away from the common good in order to promote private interests. Working as a government clerk in Washington D.C. after the war, he was well-situated to comment on the failure of public leaders and their impact on the state. “I say that the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth terms of the American Presidency,” he wrote of the prewar precedencies of Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan, “have shown that the villainy and shallowness of rulers (back’d by the machinery of great parties) are just as eligible to these states as to any foreign despotism, kingdom or empire.”15 Fusing a logic of decline reminiscent of both classical and modern republicans with his own distinctively democratic idealism, Whitman traced corruption to a series of changes whose roots stretched back before the war but were coming into fruition afterward.16 Put together, these changes, most notably the professionalization of legislatures, the development stable party system, and the rise of powerful industrial capitalists, systematically incentivized the pursuit of private interest over public good, subverting the democratic system and threatening to undermine the very essence of democracy.

Whitman’s criticism of political corruption follows two basic lines. First, he argued that modern parties had effectively gained control of political leaders by influencing the outcomes of elections, a development that would shift their loyalty from


16 Whitman’s complaints about the American political system do not originate solely in the postwar period. The unpublished tract “The Eighteenth Presidency,” written in 1856, reflects deep doubts about American politics; however, the postwar period represents the first time that Whitman questioned the status of the democratic system as a whole, from the corruption of political leaders to the failure of the public.
constituents to parties. “Of holders of public office,” he argued, “I have found that not one in a hundred has been chosen by any spontaneous selection of the outsiders, the people, but all have been nominated and put through by little or large caucuses of the politicians, and have got in by corrupt rings and electioneering, not capacity or desert.”

Chosen not by the people but through insider politics, the influence of parties over elections weakened the link between officeholders and the citizenry, replacing the will of the people with those of a few powerful party officials. Second, Whitman argued that by controlling elected officials, political parties could manipulate the state to serve their own interests. “I have noticed more and more,” he wrote, “the alarming spectacle of parties usurping the government, and openly and shamelessly wielding it for party purposes.”

If corruption is defined as a turning from public interest to private, the usurpation of the government by party machinery represents a systemic corruption that calls into question the legitimacy of democracy in the United States. Captured by political parties, the state was decaying from within, ceasing to be a democracy in any meaningful sense of the word. “[T]he controlling ‘Democratic’ nominating conventions of our Republic,” he wrote, displaying his disgust, “were getting to represent and be composed of more and more putrid and dangerous materials. … from the tumors and abscesses of the land; from the skeletons and skulls in the vaults of the federal alms-house; and from the running sores of the great cities.”

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17 Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 386.

18 Ibid., 386.

As corrupt leaders filled positions with party lackeys, Whitman observed that the people were more and more excluded from politics in favor of insider cabals. In addition to being anti-democratic, this self-perpetuating process precluded the possibility that any outsider could exercise influence of over politics. “It still remains doubtful to me whether … the first-class genius will ever personally appear in the high political stations.”

Whitman mused. “Those offices, or the candidacy for them, arranged, won, by caucusing, money, the favoritism or pecuniary interest of rings, the superior manipulation of the ins over the outs, or the outs over the ins.”

More serious still was that Whitman saw the empowerment of parties as the destruction of participatory politics. By reducing the vast possibilities of politics to two facile choices, “these savage, wolfish parties,” would eliminate even the potential for citizen participation and deliberative democracy. In marginalizing the role of the people, parties were becoming the ultimate authority in America. Even now, he claimed, they effectively “control’d the forming of, the entire personnel, the atmosphere, nutriment and chyle, of our municipal, State, and National politics … while the great masses of people, farmers, mechanics, and traders were helpless in their gripe [sic].”

Mirroring the corruption of public leaders was a corresponding change in the business class in which the public good was increasingly abandoned in favor of profit. Writing in the early years of the Gilded Age, Whitman witnessed a fundamental shift in America’s economic system. Although he praised industry for the creation of material

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20 Whitman, “General Suffrage, Elections, &c.,” in Prose Works, 530-531.

21 Whitman “Democratic Vistas,” 400.

22 Ibid., 429.
prosperity, he also worried about the rise of modern industrial capitalism and the impact it would have on the nation. While political corruption broke the links between elected officials and their constituents, corruption in private business threatened to undermine the principles of American commerce, reducing it from an activity that promoted community, self-reliance, and mutual trust to an all-consuming quest for profit. 23 “In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain,” he complained, invoking the Biblical story of Exodus. “The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician’s serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field.”24 As moneymaking displaced every other motive, this new industrial capitalism linked people’s status in society to their ability to succeed financially. Those who failed were thought inept, and those who did not advance were believed to deserve their fate. In service to industrial capitalism, money had become the measure of individual worth. “[D]emocracy looks with suspicious, ill-satisfied eye upon the very poor, the ignorant, and on those out of business.” Whitman wrote, recognizing the growing link between liberal democracy and industrial capitalism. “She asks for men and women with occupations, well-off owners of houses and acres … and hastens to make them.”25

Attending this shift in economic activity, Whitman bewailed the rise of a new class of businessmen. Unscrupulous and venal, these men embodied the very worst of

23 Traditionally business was undertaken for a number of reasons – including faith, subsistence, communal improvement and security – with profit being only an ancillary concern. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 35-44.


25 Ibid., 384.
humanity, a class of *nouveau riche* profiteers who lacked any sort of self-restraint. It was this class, he argued, that was responsible for “the absence of moral tone in our current politics and business, and the almost entire futility of absolute and simple honor as a counterpoise against the enormous greed for worldly wealth.” But Whitman went well beyond dismissing the character of this “mob of fashionably dress’d speculators and vulgarians.” He warned that their increasing infiltration in the political sphere would turn political institutions into instruments that served the interests of the rich, creating a naked plutocracy. As the nation was effectively auctioned off, all semblance of democracy would disappear, the responsibilities of the government coopted in the service of a few powerful and connected individuals. “The depravity of the business classes of our country,” he claimed, “is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments … are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, [and] mal-administration.” At the root of the problem was the disappearance of mutual interest. Whitman clearly understood that as inequality increased, rich and poor would have less and less in common, until there could no longer be any basis for a meaningful common good and therefore no foundation for a shared sense of the American nation. Thus the rise of industrial capitalism, with its attending disparities of wealth, represented nothing less than a dire threat to the future of the republic. “[A]s things exist now in the States,” wrote Whitman in 1876, “what is more terrible, more alarming, than the total want of any such

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28 Ibid., 370.
fusion and mutuality of love, belief, and rapport of interest, between the comparatively few successful rich, and the great masses of the unsuccessful, the poor?”

Hypocrisy

Although corruption presented a serious challenge to Whitman’s democratic thought, it was ultimately a symptom of a much deeper problem. Abetting the behavior of elites, a wide-spread moral hypocrisy had poisoned societal mores. “I will confess to you,” he wrote in an unpublished manuscript likely penned in the 1870’s. “I do not so much alarm myself – though very painful and full of dismay – at the corruption in all public life – It is but an outlet and expression on the surface of something far deeper – namely in the blood.”

Arising from the misalignment between a nation’s political values and its practices, hypocrisy was exhibited most clearly by the contradiction between the America’s Constitutional principles and way those principles were enacted as policy. Forcing the people to live in a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance, it created an environment in which no one could be trusted, and basic sociality was in danger of being compromised. “The spectacle is appalling,” he complained. “We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the


31 Whitman’s concern for hypocrisy in America cannot be strictly relegated to his postwar thought. Even in his newspapers articles of the 1840s, he had claimed that slavery was incompatible with democracy; however, his desire for union overpowered his passion for justice in the years before the war, and he sided formally with anti-extensionists and the Wilmot Proviso. The war, however, radically altered Whitman’s political commitments and occasioned a reconciliation of his conflicted thought, and as such, it required a reevaluation of and engagement with the persistent hypocrisy and injustice that underpinned the America system.
women in the men.” Unlike corruption, which at its heart remained an elite problem, the hypocritical conflict between principles and practices involved everyone, permeating all aspects of society. Whitman develops his argument about the dangers of hypocrisy by focusing on two specific examples – limitations on suffrage and the loss of revolutionary character – as a means to identify the underlying problem, the failure of moral conscience which lies at the heart of hypocrisy.

In the most explicitly political work of his career, Democratic Vistas, Whitman describes the state of suffrage in the United States as hypocrisy of the most fundamental sort. Responding to Thomas Carlyle’s denouncement of popular suffrage as “swarmery” in Shooting Niagara – and After?, he argued that by denying many of its citizens the vote, America failed to value the fundamental principle of democratic participation. His argument is elegant. Although he begins by recognizing “the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States” – he lists a veritable litany of classical critiques against democracy – he rejects Carlyle’s argument that the vote should be limited to an aristocratic upper class. “In fact,” he continued, “it is to admit

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33 Although Whitman was generally in favor of women’s suffrage, he never formally sided with feminists of his era. His letters and private writings, on the other hand, indicate an active, intellectual engagement with the progress of women’s rights. See Sherry Ceniza, Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers (Tuscaloosa AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998). The poet’s views on the enfranchisement of newly freed slaves, however, was far more complex. While at times he wavered in his opposition, he generally was disinclined to allow them the vote. For a full treatment of the issue see Geoffrey Sill, “Whitman on the Black Question” Walt Whitman Review 8 (1990):69-75.


and face these dangers I am writing.”\textsuperscript{36} Rather than seeing a reason to limit democratic practice, Whitman held that voting was the means to overcome a narrowly self-interested populace. The primary benefit of enfranchisement, he argued, was moral rather than procedural, and as such, expanding the right to vote was the path to better citizens and ultimately the full development of humankind. “To be a voter with the rest is not so much” he explained. “But to become an enfranchised man, and now, impediments removed, to stand and start without humiliation, and equal with the rest; to commence, … the grand experiment of development, whose end … may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman – that \textit{is} something.”\textsuperscript{37} A universal franchise is the formal expression of democracy’s commitment to equality; the right to vote is therefore essential to the development of a fully democratic people. Whitman claimed that only through participation – the “widest opening of the doors” – can democracy’s commitment to equality be fully realized and hypocrisy addressed.\textsuperscript{38} “We endow the masses with suffrage for their own sake, no doubt,” he claimed, citing the value of the vote, “then, perhaps still more, from another point of view, for community’s sake.”\textsuperscript{39}

The state of the franchise in the United States was mirrored by the empty symbolism of America’s revolutionary heritage. A proud descendent of the founding generation, Whitman saw hypocrisy in a country founded by revolution that seemed to lack any persistent revolutionary spirit. Throughout his childhood, he was told tales of the

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 363

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 380.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 364.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 381.
great American revolutionaries and the war that they had fought. His grandfather boasted of his friendship with of Thomas Paine, and his parents took him to see General Lafayette when he visited America in 1824, even going so far as to sit the young boy on his lap.\textsuperscript{40} The deeds of these heroes and their compatriots were the backstory of Whitman’s America, the cornerstone of sound democracy. “Not only are These States the born offspring of Revolt against mere overweening Authority,” he argued, “but seeing ahead for Them in the future, a long, long reign of Peace, with all the growths, corruptions and tyrannies & fossilisms of Obedience, … I feel it worth while to keep well up, & vital even such ideas.”\textsuperscript{41} The revolutionary spirit represented the restless, ever-changing nature of democracy. Practically, he saw in it the power to combat the complacency and stagnation that had overtaken American life. “The eager and often inconsiderate appeals of reformers and revolutionists are indispensable, to counterbalance the inertness and fossilism making so large a part of human institutions.”\textsuperscript{42} Yet in the years after the war, Whitman feared that America had turned its back on its revolutionary tradition and betrayed its founding principles. By abandoning its heritage, becoming a stable yet hypocritical nation, America had lost its drive to perfect and renew itself. “As circulation to air,” he wrote, “so is agitation and a plentiful degree of speculative license to political

\textsuperscript{40} Whitman, “Specimen Days,” in \textit{Prose Works}, 15.


\textsuperscript{42} Whitman, “Democratic Vistas,” 383.
and moral sanity. Indirectly, but surely, goodness, virtue, law … follow freedom. These, to democracy, are what the keel is to the ship, or saltiness to the ocean.”

Underpinning the hypocrisy of suffrage and America’s empty revolutionary tradition was a failure in what Whitman called “moral conscience.” Referring to the shared moral presuppositions of a society, he uses this concept to describe the attachment people feel to the basic values of their society. In America’s case, it refers to the extent to which citizens value democratic principles. “[T]he element of the moral conscience,” he wrote in Democratic Vistas, “is the most important, the verteber to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking, or seriously enfeebled or ungrown.” While Americans fervently expressed belief in democracy – going through its procedures such as voting – he claimed that they lacked necessary convictions that would indicate a strong commitment to it. Ultimately a failure of public morality, hypocrisy was rooted in the nation’s culture, specifically in its religious practices. “View’d to-day, from a point of view sufficiently over-arching,” he claimed, “the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious.” Descended from Old World Christian practices, Whitman claimed that religion in the United States was unfit for American democracy. Rather than awakening human minds and invigorating their moral capacities, its influence corrupted and distorted the spirit of a democratic people, creating a conflicted and hypocritical populace. “But at present,” he wrote, describing the moral impact of American religion, “and consider’d with reference to purposes of patriotism, health, a

43 Ibid., 383.
44 Ibid., 369.
noble personality, religion, and the democratic adjustments, all these swarms of poems, literary magazines, dramatic plays … are useless and a mockery. They strengthen and nourish no one, express nothing characteristic, give decision and purpose to no one, and suffice only the lowest level of vacant minds.”

The problem of religion had little to do with spiritual beliefs. Whitman himself was largely uninterested in institutional religion, never joining a church or professing faith except in the vaguest spiritual terms. Rather, he was concerned with the social effects of religious practices. From this perspective despite its largely Protestant character, Christianity in American was still dominated by pre-Reformation ways. “For feudalism, caste, the ecclesiastic traditions,” he wrote, “though palpably retreating from political institutions, still hold essentially, by their spirit, even in this country, entire possession of the more important fields, indeed the very subsoil, of education, and of social standards and literature.” Ignoring theology, he focused on church politics dominated by clergy who used their moral authority to reinforce their own power and the submission of their followers. Thus despite its democratic political institutions, the nation was still gripped by an essentially feudal order. “In short, and to sum up,” he wrote, “America, betaking herself to formative action, (as it is about time for more solid achievement, and less windy promise,) must, for her purposes, cease to recognize a theory of character grown of feudal aristocracies, or form'd by merely literary standards, or from any ultramarine, full-dress formulas of culture, polish, caste, &c.” By linking

46 Ibid., 411-412.


48 Ibid., 402.
public morality to social traditions steeped in dominance and submission, religion in America encouraged hypocrisy. Without reform, Whitman claimed that the United States would never develop a moral conscience consonant with its democratic principles. “Nor must I fail, again and yet again, to clinch, reiterate more plainly still,” he warned, “the lofty aim. … Offsetting the material civilization of our race, our nationality, … must be its moral civilization. … The climax of this loftiest range of civilization, rising above all the gorgeous shows and results of wealth, intellect, power, and art, as such – above even theology and religious fervor – is to be its development, from the eternal bases, and the fit expression, of absolute Conscience, moral soundness, Justice.”

Soullessness

Compounding corruption and hypocrisy, Whitman diagnosed soullessness as the fatal flaw plaguing American society. Broadly speaking, he uses the word “soul” to describe the ineffable quality that underpins both personal and national identity. “To lands, to man, to woman,” he asked, “what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity, idiocrasy [sic], free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself?” A nation that possesses a soul, he goes on, shares a set of self-understandings and cultural practices that serves as a foundation for political and social unity. Reiterating an old theme, he locates the foundation for such a national identity in artistic traditions. “This Soul” he wrote, “its other name, in these Vistas, is LITERATURE.” Bound to the cultures in which it was produced, literature helps define a people, giving voice to their

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49 Ibid., 414-415.
50 Ibid., 410-411.
51 Ibid., 413.
moral and political principles and binding those principles into their very identity. Such had been the case throughout recorded history. The great nations of the world – Britain, Greece, Rome – all possessed equally great artistic traditions that informed and defined the people. “It must still be reiterated … the deep lesson of history and time, that all else in the contributions of a nation or age, through its politics, materials, heroic personalities, military eclat, &c., remains crude …until vitalized by national, original archetypes in literature.”\textsuperscript{52}

To Whitman, soullessness was fatal to national unity. Without a shared identity to give its people a sense of purpose and serve as an affective basis for unity, America, as a social and political experiment, would fail. “The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism,” he exclaimed with great despair. “In fashionable life, flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time.”\textsuperscript{53} Yet despite his bitterness, Whitman claimed that if the people were selfish and unsociable, it was because they had been made so by their culture. American authors had failed to produce works that instilled the democratic principles of liberty and equality. “A scornful superciliousness rules in literature,” he wrote. “The aim of all the \textit{littérature}s is to find something to make fun of. … Conversation is a mass of badinage. From deceit in the spirit, the mother of all false deeds, the offspring is already incalculable.”\textsuperscript{54} Whitman saw literature as more than a vehicle for popular stories or sensationalist reporting. Like the epic poems of the ancient Greeks or the plays of 

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 405.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 370.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 370.}
Shakespeare, it must do more than reflect its culture. Literature must be no less than the very foundation of identity, showing the people of the United States what it means to be American. “Our fundamental want to-day in the United States,” he wrote, “is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatuses, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision.”

Although Democratic Vistas is Whitman’s most sustained commentary on American politics, it is also a scathing critique of American culture. Rather than struggling to create something original, most authors, he claimed, simply parroted outdated literary forms from Europe. Worse, publishers capitalized on the lack of international copyrights and simply reprinted popular European works instead of encouraging new American authors. “America has yet morally and artistically originated nothing,” he claimed. “She seems singularly unaware that the models of persons, books, manners, &c., appropriate for former conditions and for European lands, are but exiles and exotics here.” The persistent influence of literature from Europe stifled the development of a uniquely American culture, perpetuating outdated social norms. Instead of bolstering people’s commitment to democracy, teaching them to love each other as equals, literature in America, like religion, reinforced the hierarchy and dominance of feudal societies, rendering the people forever unaware of the potential egalitarian connections that they could share in a democracy. “It is not generally realized, but it is

55 Ibid., 365.
56 Ibid., 395.
true,” he wrote, describing the link between cultures and regimes, “all the sociology, personality, politics and religion of those wonderful [Old World] states, resided in their literature or esthetics, that what was afterwards the main support of European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world over there … so saturating it in the conscious and unconscious blood, breed, belief, and intuitions of men, that it still prevails powerful to this day, in defiance of the mighty changes of time.”57

Although Whitman saw the Civil War as a catastrophe, the Reconstruction era proved in many ways little better. Politicians and the people squabbled over the spoils of the defeated South, forcing concessions and fomenting later strife. He decried these fractious politics, describing them as based in self-interest and the desire to punish. “As I write this particular passage, (November, 1868) the din of disputation rages around me. … Congress convenes; the President sends his message; reconstruction is still in abeyance; the nomination and the contest for the twenty-first Presidentiad draw close, with loudest threat and bustle.”58 To combat the soullessness that had beset the nation, America needed more than just the political trappings of a representative democracy. Peoples were created not by political institutions but through the lives they share, the stories they tell, the heroes they venerate, and the practices that make up their daily lives. Lacking a culture that would support a democracy, Americans were united by only a bland and ineffectual institutionalism under the Constitution. Without something to

57 Ibid., 366.

58 Ibid., 384. Numbering by term rather than time in office, Whitman is referring to the election of Ulysses S. Grant.
engage the emotions and instruct people on the social values that must accompany a
democratic society, the country would forever remain adrift. As Whitman put it:

For not only is it not enough that new blood, new frame of
democracy shall be vivified and held together merely by
political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, &c., but it
is clear to me that unless it goes deeper, gets as least as firm
and as warm a hold in men’s hearts, emotions and belief,
as, in their days, feudalism or ecclesiasticism, and
inaugurating its own perennial sources, welling from the
centre forever, its strength will be defective, its growth
doubtful, and its main charm wanting.\(^{59}\)

A nation of immigrants barely one hundred years old, America lacked the foundations for
a shared history. Just out of living memory from the founders and decades away from the
popularization of individualistic cultural icons like John Henry and Paul Bunyan,
Americans had no understanding of what it meant to be American, no means to
contextualize the moral and social significance of political democracy, leaving the nation,
as yet, unborn. “The Scotch have their born ballads, subtly expressing their past and
present, and expressing character,” he wrote. “The Irish have theirs. England, Italy,
France, Spain, theirs. What has America?”\(^{60}\)

Renewal and Democratic Culture

Although he is generally regarded as a broadly democratic thinker, in the years
after the war, Whitman increasingly conceptualized the nation in terms of decline and
renewal in a manner reminiscent of civic republicans. This change is less a departure than
it would initially seem. Given his father’s reverence for Thomas Jefferson and his own

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 367-368.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 413.
support for the Democratic Party in his youth, Whitman’s earliest political convictions have been described as a relatively conventional “Jeffersonian-Jacksonian republicanism.” However, unlike the founders, who were by and large focused on creating a stable government, the poet approached a nation he believed to be in a deep state of decay. “Confess that to severe eyes,” he wrote, surveying the nation, “using a moral microscope on humanity, a sort of dry Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics.” With this in mind, Whitman developed a logic of democratic renewal that was absent from the works of the founders. Although influenced by civic republicans like Rousseau, he envisioned the rejuvenation of the nation in his own terms, creating a theory that reflects his characteristic democratic idealism. “[S]he [America] will understand herself,” he wrote describing the process of renewal, “become a full-form'd world, and divine Mother not only of material but spiritual worlds, in ceaseless succession through time – the main thing being the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular, on which all the superstructures of the future are to permanently rest.” Whitman’s narrative of decline and renewal reconciles his democratic optimism with his experiences in the war. To each of his critiques – corruption, hypocrisy, and soullessness – he proposed a corrective logic that tied the rejuvenation of the nation to the development of a democratic culture that could support the institutions created by the Constitution.

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63 Ibid., 426.
For Whitman, corruption was essentially an elite problem. The influence of venal public officials and self-possessed businessmen had transformed the government into little more than a mutual benefit association between the rich and the powerful, fusing them into a new aristocracy. Implicit in this critique is the poet’s commitment to the principle of democratic accountability; although America is a representative system, government exists, at its root, to serve the people. “As to the political section of Democracy,” he wrote, “few probably are the minds, even in these republican States, that fully comprehend the aptness of that phrase, ‘THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE.’”

Whitman opposed the corruption of elites with the natural virtue of the masses. Although he recognized their faults, calling them “ungrammatical, untidy, and their sins gaunt and ill-bred,” he also saw in them an almost unlimited font of natural goodness. He called for the invigoration of democracy through the inclusion of these “untidy” masses, creating a more robust democracy to challenge the ruling cabals. “What have we here, if not, towering above all talk and argument, the plentifully-supplied, last-needed proof of democracy, in its personalities?,” he asked, referring to the tumultuous years of the early 1860s. “Grand, common stock! to me the accomplish'd and convincing growth, prophetic of the future; proof undeniable to sharpest sense, of perfect beauty, tenderness and pluck, that never feudal lord, nor Greek, nor Roman breed, yet rival'd.”

Posing popular power against elite corruption, Whitman

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64 Ibid., 376.
65 Ibid., 376.
66 Ibid., 378-379.
calls on the people to save their own system, recognizing that “a little healthy rudeness, savage virtue, justification of what one has in one’s self, whatever it is, is demanded.”

Rather than shy away from democracy as the American founders did, Whitman saw in the people a solution to corruption. However, by democracy he meant more than just formal inclusion into a rather narrow set of political practices. In order to ameliorate the problems facing the nation, democracy must reach to the people’s very core, transforming them into new, more capable sorts of citizens. “Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits and manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men … democracy in all public and private life.” For Whitman, this notion of an internalized democracy promised to awaken the people as a political force. If the rich and powerful used their influence to benefit themselves, then the people, empowered by democratic practice, should do the same. “Over those politicians and great and little rings, and over all their insolence and wiles, and over the powerfulest of parties,” he wrote describing the hidden power of the people, “looms a power, too sluggish maybe, but ever holding decisions and decrees in hand, ready … [to crush] to atoms the mightiest of parties.” Whitman’s logic of democratic renewal saw in the very act of political participation the power to remake the people. Just as the primary benefit of enfranchisement was moral rather than procedural, the great power of democracy was its ability to train people to live with each other as

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67 Ibid., 394.
68 Ibid., 389.
69 Ibid., 387.
citizens. “Political democracy,” he explained, “as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training-school for making first-class men. It is life's gymnasium, not of good only, but of all.”

While corruption was essentially a political problem, hypocrisy was a moral and religious one. In response to the failures of the church, Whitman calls for the creation of a civil religion. He describes “a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command, dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, reconstituting, democratizing society.” The American Revolution was more than just a founding moment for Whitman. It represented the creation of the first genuinely modern state, the first time a nation had the potential to break away from the social conventions, religious inheritances, and political prejudices of the medieval world. Accepting science and reinforcing democracy, Whitman’s civil religion was to be a distinctly modern religion. “We see that almost everything that has been written, sung, or stated, of old, with reference to humanity under the feudal and oriental institutes, religions, and for other lands, needs to be re-written, re-sung, re-stated, in terms consistent with the institution of these States, and to come in range and obedient uniformity with them.” For Whitman, religion is not a spiritual matter. Rather it is a cultural institution that inculcates social morality throughout a community. Just as European religions reinforced monarchical and feudal regimes, a democratic religion must invigorate the people’s commitment to democracy. “We want, for these States,” he

70 Ibid., 385.
71 Ibid., 410.
72 Ibid., 425.
explained, “for the general character, a cheerful, religious fervor, endued with the ever-present modifications of the human emotions, friendship, benevolence, with a fair field for scientific inquiry, the right of individual judgment, and always the cooling influences of material Nature.”

Whitman’s civil religion is premised on a radical reconstruction of moral agency. In a democracy, morality no longer needed to be taught; instead it should be discovered. “The priest departs,” he wrote, “the divine literatus comes.” Despite their shared position as elites, the social roles of priest and author are quite different. The priest teaches morality; the author provides the materials from which people can derive morality on their own. “Bibles may convey, and priests expound,” he wrote, “but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one's isolated Self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable.” By replacing priest with author, Whitman relocates moral authority in the hermeneutics of a still unwritten set of democratic texts. Public morality is, in essence, transmitted not through relatively closed communities of clergy and elites, but rather through interactions between writers and readers. “Like America, it [poetry] must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past,” he explained. “[I]t must place in the van, and hold up at all hazards, the banner of the divine pride of man in himself, (the radical foundation of the new religion.) Long enough have the People been listening to poems in which

73 Ibid., 416n.
74 Ibid., 365.
75 Ibid., 399.
common humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors. But America listens to no such poems.”

Whitman’s critique of the soullessness of the American nation is fundamentally a comment on the state of democratic culture in his time. Still bound by the cultural artifacts of dominance and submission, the American people lacked any understanding of themselves as citizens of a modern nation. “[T]he fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close,” he wrote describing the problem in America, “continually haunts me. … [N]othing is plainer than the need, a long period to come, of a fusion of the states into the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one.”

Although the Constitution defined the political organization of American society, it did not supply its affective unity. Communities may be structured by political institutions, but the success of those arrangements requires a common identity to serve as a basis for mutual respect and a sense of common purpose. “For, I say,” he continues, “the true nationality of the States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, and is to be, after all, … the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving lesser and definite distinctions in cast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power.” To correct the course of democratic decline, Whitman calls for the creation of new American culture. Instead of encouraging frivolousness and self-absorption, it would inculcate in the people the democratic values of equality and

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76 Ibid., 412.
77 Ibid., 368.
78 Ibid., 368.
freedom. “America demands a poetry,” he exclaimed, “that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself.”

Whitman envisioned a class of literary elites to create this new democratic culture. A less legalistic version of Rousseau’s Legislator, the American “Literatus” was charged with creation of culture suited for a democratic America.  

“I demand races of orbic Bards,” he exclaimed, “with unconditional uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the west!” No longer was the solitary poet to represent the democratic republic, as Whitman himself had in 1855; instead an entire class of authors, poets, and artists was summoned to the task of encouraging the nation to become truly democratic. Without correction, “our modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain, and we are on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned.” Facing this fate, he gladly empowered these elites. In doing so, however, he did not abandon democracy as an ideal. The “Literatus order” would reinvigorate the people’s capacity for democracy, not supplant it. By inculcating a democratic civic virtues focusing on participation, expressing a moral, civil religion based in egalitarian principles, and fostering a common culture that would transcend political institutions, these poets and thinkers might restore America to the great principles of its foundation. “A strong mastership of the general inferior self by the

79 Ibid., 412.

80 Although Whitman does not mention Rousseau in his published works, his private manuscripts contain commentary on The Confessions and detailed notes on The Social Contract. See Walt Whitman Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, 1843-1852.

81 Ibid., 407.

82 Ibid., 424.
superior self,” wrote Whitman, “is to be aided, secured, indirectly, but surely, by the literatus, in his works, shaping, for individual or aggregate democracy, a great passionate body, in and along with which goes a great masterful spirit.”

For all his despair, Whitman does not turn entirely from his early political optimism. His work after the war does not represent resignation, but rather the determined creation of a spirit of democratic renewal. “To him or her within whose thought rages the battle,” he wrote, describing the turmoil both within himself and his audience, “advancing, retreating, between democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the people's crudeness, vice, caprices, I mainly write this essay.”

Put together, Whitman’s narrative of democratic decline calls for nothing less than a reconceptualization of democracy. America, in the Whitman’s mind, had an excellent political system. What it needed now were excellent people to live under it. “[W]ith the priceless value of our political institutions, general suffrage,” he wrote, “I say that, far deeper than these, what finally and only is to make of our western world a nationality superior to any hither known, and outtopping the past, must be vigorous, yet unsuspected Literatures, perfect personalities and sociologies, original, transcendental, and expressing … democracy and the modern.”

Opposing corruption with popular participation, he foresaw the renewal of not only the state but also of the people themselves. In confronting moral hypocrisy, he championed the invigoration of the individual moral capacity of the people. Finally, he empowered a new class of democratic elites to act not as tyrants but as stern teachers who

83 Ibid., 421-422.
84 Ibid., 363.
85 Ibid., 364.
would show the citizens a unified way to a new life under democratic conditions. “I submit, therefore, that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future.” he prophesied. “It too must be adorn'd, credited with its results - - then, when it, with imperial power, through amplest time, has dominated mankind … has fashion'd, systematized, and triumphantly finish'd and carried out, in its own interest, and with unparallel'd success, a new earth and a new man.”

**Conclusion**

More than a century separates us from Whitman, but his narrative of democratic decline and renewal still has potential to help us understand contemporary America. Many of the problems that Whitman faced still trouble the nation today. Confronted with the decline of popular power as big government and big business became increasingly one in the same, Whitman feared that democracy would become a lost ideal. Today the situation is no better. Public leaders pursue private interest aided by an increasingly powerful business class whose interest in elections is Constitutionally protected. Although racial and gender discrimination are less egregious than they were in Whitman’s time, he would see hypocrisy in America’s increasingly severe economic inequality. Finally, he would claim that American still lacks a soul. Although false displays of patriotism are common, there is little that unites the nation beyond war and fear of terrorism.

Now, as then, much of the blame for this is in the hands of those who produce our culture. Valuing spectacle, frivolity, and entertainment over substance, popular culture in

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86 Ibid., 390.
Whitman’s day produced people unsuited to life in a democracy. Driven by the same motives, contemporary culture is little better. The worship of celebrity and wealth encourage people to put their own interests above others. Media of all types pander to simplistic stereotypes that reinforce racial, gender and economic inequalities. And political pundits on cable television encourage division across political spectrum.

Whitman encouraged Americans of his time to examine their culture and the impact it had on their political life. It seems that in these times, this advice is still relevant, and perhaps even more urgent.
“The Earth to be Spann’d, Connected by Net-Work;” Walt Whitman’s Industrial Internationalism

With the pounding of a symbolic golden spike at Promontory Summit, Utah, May 1869, the eastern and western halves of the United States were connected by the Transcontinental Railroad. The blows of the hammer were carried nearly instantaneously throughout the nation from a makeshift telegraph booth set up at the site. With the arrival of the message “DONE” in New York City, “there was booming of cannon, peals from Trinity [Church] chimes, and general rejoicing over the completion of the great enterprise, in the success of which not only this country, but the whole civilized world, is directly interested.” ¹ In the years after the Civil War, advances in industry and technology presaged not just a political unification of the United States but also a physical one. Railroads and telegraphs had shortened a six month journey across the country to only a week and made communication virtually instantaneous, allowing Americans to connect both physically and politically across the vast distances of the nation. Lewis Clement, acting chief engineer for the Central Pacific Railroad, declared the Transcontinental Railroad to be “the bond of iron which is to hold our glorious country in one eternal union.”² But to many, the completion represented the promise of


unification not only nationally but also internationally, for the greater hope expressed at Promontory Summit that day was that the Columbian dream of connecting Europe to Asia had been finally realized. In the words of Grenville Dodge, chief engineer for the Union Pacific, in his speech that day: “This is the way to India.”

Unlike mid-nineteen-century thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau or Herman Melville, who viewed technological development with a suspicious eye, Walt Whitman believed that industrial technology was a uniquely positive force that ultimately would unite not only the nation but the whole world. Developments such as the steamship, the completion of the Suez Canal, and the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable promised to connect people across the globe in much the same way that railroads had linked the North American continent. Speaking at the opening of the fortieth annual National Industrial Exposition for the American Institute in 1871, Whitman predicted that the same forces that had pushed the United States westward across the continent would in time see the whole “world all spann’d with iron rails – with lines of steamships threading every sea.” Unlike his contemporary Henry Adams, who seemed often overwhelmed by industrial progress, describing it with an almost religious reverence as a “symbol of infinity,” Whitman understood its role in concrete, materialistic terms. By fundamentally altering the ways in which people connected to each other, these industrial advances

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3 Grenville Dodge, quoted in ibid., 370.

4 Walt Whitman, “After All, Not to Create Only,” New York Evening Post, September 7, 1871, 2. Due to Whitman’s alterations and expurgations in the last years of his life, I have used his works as they were published in the postwar period – specifically the 1872 and 1881-1882 editions of Leaves of Grass, along with the 1865 Drum-Taps – instead of the so-called “Death Bed” edition of 1891-1892. Generally poems that Whitman published first in periodicals underwent significant changes before being included in his “official” volumes, but when this is not the case, the original publication of these will be kept. Prose works are drawn from his 1892 Complete Prose Works.

would provide the conditions for the formation of communities unfettered by distance, radically reconstructing political life by allowing people to transcend local concerns in favor of global interests. Furthermore, the unification of the world by a shared material culture – promulgated by the endless panoply of goods and ideas created by American industrial society – would engender changes in the political consciousness of people around the world, mitigating the differences between nations and serving as the basis for a true international community.

Using his post-Civil War poetry and prose, this chapter investigates the role of industrialization in Whitman’s internationalist thought. Although often described as an American Hegelian, Whitman’s adaptation of Hegel’s idealism was surprisingly materialistic, being premised on a radical embrace of industrialism. Reconsidering this hybridized idealism, it explores his vision of a global cultural cosmopolitanism that he saw being brought about by the power of industrial progress. Admittedly, Whitman’s vision was rooted in the American experience, and therefore has implicitly imperialist foundations. But his project was only nationalist in a limited sense, since it sought ultimately to transcend the nation in favor of an understanding of politics consisting of global communities united by a shared cosmopolitan culture. This chapter opens with a discussion of the materialist and idealist dimensions of Whitman’s internationalism, analyzing the hybrid character of his conception of progress. It proceeds to discuss the connections between nationalist and internationalist thought in his later works, describing the global implications of American expansion. In the final section, it investigates his use of the crowd to describe the development of an increasingly cosmopolitan world. It
concludes by suggesting some of the implications of Whitman’s internationalist vision for American political thought in today’s rapidly globalizing world.

Whitman and the World

Although Whitman has long been seen as an internationalist thinker, there is little consensus on what specifically his internationalism entailed. While often described as a nationalistic imperialist, one who championed the aggressive expansion of the American nation at the expense of native and competing cultures, he is rarely compared to the more unabashed defenders of the doctrine during his time like John L. O’Sullivan or Horace Greeley. Thus as early as 1935, Albert K. Weinberg proclaimed him the American poet of expansionist but humanitarian nationalism, portraying his imperialism as a benign version of the manifest destiny of the day. Shortly afterward, on the eve of American involvement in World War II, Klaus Mann, son of the novelist Thomas, described him as a distinctly non-hegemonic expansionist, a thinker who did not seek to “humiliate or

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7 Whitman’s non-hegemonic expansionism does not absolve him of all racial and cultural imperialist ideas. Like many of his peers, he subscribed to various theories of scientific racism that became popular in the years after the war. See Kenneth M. Price, “Whitman’s Solution to ‘The Problem of Blacks’,” Resources for American Literary Study 15 (1985): 205-208; Geoffrey Sill, “Whitman on ‘The Black Question’: A New Manuscript,” Walt Whitman Quarterly Review 8 (1990): 69-75. Additionally, throughout his writings on America, Native Americans are either stereotyped images or completely absent. See Ed Folsom, Walt Whitman’s Native Representations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 55-98. However, while it is possible to dismiss Whitman’s internationalist thought as the musings of yet another mid-nineteenth century racist, this view obscures the extent to which his internationalism was an attempt to envision a world independent from traditional European imperialism and the racial hegemony that such a project implied, as evidenced by his sympathetic inclusion of indigenous peoples and cultures, especially in his later works.

exclude other races or cultures. The keystone of his program is solidarity, not conquest. Admittedly in the Vietnam War era, observers like the Mexican nationalist Mauriciano Gonzáles de la Garza portrayed him in a harsher light, as a proponent of the worst sort of Americanism, citing his pro-Mexican war Brooklyn Daily Eagle articles during the 1840s as clear examples of his bias. But by and large, most scholars have contended that Whitman’s internationalism was more cosmopolitan, celebrating the spread of global democracy. Thus, Betsy Erkkila, writing in her Whitman the Political Poet, claimed that he depicted “a world united in a common democratic culture by means of modern advances in communication and transportation.” And Walter Grünzweig echoes this interpretation in a recent series of essays in which he concludes that while the imperialist implications cannot be completely removed, Whitman’s work made clear the mutuality between people, “making global connections of various groups throughout the world.”


11 Betsy Erkkila, Whitman the Political Poet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 266. Conversely, M. Jimmie Killingsworth argues that it is the celebration of these advances in technology and therefore the implied superiority of the culture that is the foundation of Whitman’s imperialism. M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

Although all of these authors recognize elements of Whitman’s internationalism, by attempting to classify him as either an imperialist or a cosmopolitan, they misrepresent the highly syncretic nature of his thought. Neither strictly Hegelian nor Marxist, he considers America’s role in the international community from both idealist and materialist perspectives, creating an idealistic materialism that simultaneously condemns the abuses of imperialism and celebrates its potential to connect the world across national boundaries. Whitman embraced the idea of an American nation distinct from the Old World, while also recognizing that the same processes that drove national expansion – industrial and technological advancement – would not be bound by something as ephemeral as political borders. In the end, he envisioned a new world that had moved past nationalism and imperialism, a world that was at once local and global, possessing regional differences and national cultures, but also united in what Roger Asselineau has called “a very broad internationalism based on the universal brotherhood of men.”

Industrial Idealism

The years after the Civil War were difficult ones for Whitman. In the face of the national discord of the Reconstruction era, the great American bard could not help but feel that his poetry, which had so fervently supported unity even in the face of disaster, was a dismal failure. Dismissed from his position at the Interior Department because of controversy centering around the alleged indecency of Leaves of Grass, he came to seriously question his life’s work. David Reynolds depicts this period as the point when the poet “began to make dramatic accommodations to popular taste and established

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authority.” Yet despite the adversity, the post-war period was one of the most productive times in his life. Turning from the sanguine democratic project outlined in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman increasingly examined the political implications of the rise of industrialization, finding in it a new energy that would drive his work throughout his late career. Articulating his goals in his poetry and prose, he presented a normative project that celebrated the proliferation of the American model of industrial development, depicting the United States as a revolutionary force in the world in much the same way that Marx positioned the bourgeoisie as the power behind the engine of capitalism. In contrast to contemporary Romanticists, who viewed industry and city life with suspicion, Whitman believed that American industrialization would serve as a template for the development of the world, driving the process as it raced across the globe. “Not the least doubtful am I on any prospects of their [American] material success,” Whitman explained in his 1872 *Democratic Vistas*. “The triumphant future of their business, geographic and productive departments, on larger scales and in more varieties than ever, is certain. In those respects the republic must soon (if she does not already) outstrip all examples hitherto afforded, and dominate the world.”

Although Whitman’s knowledge of Hegelianism was obtained second-hand through works such as Henry Hedge’s *Prose Writers of Germany* and Joseph Gotstick’s

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15 Before this time, industrialization was a relatively minor theme in Whitman’s work. The industrial dimension of his internationalism in his early work can be found only in “Song of Salutation” – retitled “Salut au Monde!” in 1860 – a reference that spans a scant six lines. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY, 1856), 110.

German Literature, its impact on the second half of his career cannot be overestimated.\textsuperscript{17} Whitman’s internationalism was the product of a dialectical process of conceptual evolution that began in nationalistic imperialism and would eventually conclude with a conception of politics in which the very idea of the nation would be affirmed, negated, and transcended. Unlike Hegelian idealism, however, Whitman saw this process as characterized by an inextricable intertwining of both Geist – manifested according to Cody Marrs as the spirit of democracy itself – and material development, a process that would, in time, create a new world premised on a uniquely syncretic and American blend of theory and practice.\textsuperscript{18}

Beginning with his newspaper contributions during the 1840s, westward expansion and industrialization became dominant themes in his work, reaching their height in the years surrounding the Civil War. Most pronounced in his well-known 1865 poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” the frontier spirit represents the relentless drive to spread American material culture from coast to coast by taming the countryside, appropriating its resources for industrial purposes. “We primeval forests felling,” he wrote, describing the exploitation of the land, “we the rivers stemming, vexing we, and piercing deep the mines within; / We the surface broad surveying, and the virgin soil upheaving, / Pioneers! O pioneers!”\textsuperscript{19} Presenting his piece as a celebration of those who had settled the West, he depicts American pioneers not as primitive figures from the past, but as harbingers of


\textsuperscript{18} Marrs, 54.

\textsuperscript{19} Whitman, \textit{Drum-Taps} (New York, 1865), 25.
modernity, personifications of American progress. Through their actions, America was transformed from a largely rural, geographically disconnected country into a modern nation, providing a glimpse of the world of the future. “All the pulses of the world,” he proclaimed triumphantly, “Falling in, they beat for us, with the western movement beat; / Holding single or together, steady moving, to the front, all for us, / Pioneers! O pioneers!”

Moving from nationalism to internationalism, Whitman positions American industry as the engine of historical progress, the motive force that would spread democracy throughout the world. His pioneers represent the overcoming of the past – and its feudal ways of life – through the willful creation of a modern industrial nation. Setting the theoretical foundations that drove his later thought, he presents the new world as being created – in fact, constantly being created and recreated – against the opposition of the past in a process of continuing transcendence. “All the past we leave behind,” he wrote, describing the pioneer as an agent of history, “We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world.” Moreover, Whitman envisioned his pioneers as trailblazers for the rest of the world. “Lo! the darting bowling orb! Lo! The brother orbs all around!,” he wrote, depicting the nations of the worlds as separate planets. “These are of us, that are with us, / All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind, / We to-day’s procession heading, we the route for travel clearing, / Pioneers! O pioneers!” For Whitman, the industrial economy is characterized by eternal innovation,

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20 Ibid., 28.
21 Ibid., 26.
22 Ibid., 28-29.
interaction, and commerce. So too is internationalism – the ideological offspring of industrialization – based on eternal newness and overcoming, a vision of human destiny that transmits the transcendent values of liberty and democracy across the globe. Assuming the mantle as the leader of civilizations while recognizing the contribution of the Old World, America must now strike out in a new direction. “Have the elder races halted?,” Whitman’s pioneer asks of the Old World. “Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied, over there beyond the seas? / We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson, / Pioneers! O pioneers!”

Nationalism and Internationalism

While the promise of industrialization was confirmed by the expansion of the United States across the North American continent, its fulfillment would come as it spread beyond those borders. Whitman argued that similar living and working conditions would engender similar forms of political consciousness, claiming that if people of all nations lived and worked in the same way, the remaining differences between them ultimately would become trivial. He describes this process in his 1872 edition of Leaves of Grass: “His (Whitman uses the singular here to personify the people of the industrialized world) daring foot is on land and sea everywhere – he colonizes the Pacific, the archipelagoes; / With the steam-ship, the electric telegraph, the newspaper, the wholesale engines of war, / With these, and the world-spreading factories, he interlinks all geography, all lands.” Just as it had united the nation through the railroad

23 Ibid., 25.

24 Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Washington D.C.: Smith & Mc Dougual, 1872), 374 [My emphasis]. Originally published in the 1865 work Drum-Taps under the title “Years of the Unperform’d,” this poem does not reach its full theoretical development until the 1872 edition of Leaves of Grass.
and telegraph, industrialization would in time effectively eliminate the distance between nations through innovations such as the steamship and the transatlantic cable. This process ultimately would render national boundaries obsolete: “Years of the modern! years of the unperform’d!” he exclaims, describing the future of the world. “Your horizon rises – I see it parting away for more august dramas; / I see not America only – I see not only Liberty’s nation but other nations preparing.”\textsuperscript{25} With the material changes brought by the modern era, the principles that invigorated American democracy would be embraced across the world. Apotheosizing American industry as liberty incarnate, he believed that this process would allow people to overturn the remaining feudal and imperial relationships of domination and subjugation through the practice of democratic politics. His reference to the “wholesale engines of war” notwithstanding, there is little evidence that Whitman thought of this process as necessarily violent. Instead, he saw industrialization as a peaceable vanguard, leading the way to the liberation of the subjugated people of the world. At his most optimistic, he saw it as the basis for a worldwide democratic revolution, a radical reconstruction not only of people’s ways of lives but their political consciousness. “I see tremendous entrances and exits – I see new combinations – I see the solidarity of races,” he continued, “I see that force advancing with irresistible power on the world’s stage; / … I see men marching and countermarching by swift millions; / … I see the landmarks of European kings removed.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 373.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 374.
Admittedly, Whitman could not fully escape the imperialism implicit in his argument. At its heart, his conception of internationalism was premised on the power of the industrial process, a process that was based on a specific American experience. Yet in contrast to the bleak paternalistic burden of English thinkers such as Rudyard Kipling, he did not see America as a hegemonic power but rather as only the most recent leader in a historical process that ends in a radical reconstruction of the social and political world. “I submit, therefore, that the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future,” Whitman wrote in Democratic Vistas. “We see in it, through the long ages and cycles of ages, the results of a deep, integral human and divine principle … has fashion’d, systematized and triumphantly finish’d and carried out … a new earth and a new man.”

According to Whitman, America was beginning a third stage in its development. The first two stages – the establishment of republican forms of government and the creation of a stable, prosperous economy – satisfied the political and economic requirements necessary for the proliferation of democratic ideals. The third stage, however, moved from these physical concerns to spiritual ones, creating the conditions for what he called “a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command, dissolving the old, sloughing off old surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, reconstructing, democratizing society.” For Whitman, this idealized democracy was a higher state of civilization, and with it, America would become the next world leader in historical development. “To-day, ahead,” he wrote, “though dimly yet, we


28 Ibid., 409-410.
see, in vistas, a copious, sane, gigantic offspring. For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come.”

Although it cannot completely mitigate Whitman’s support for imperialism, his vision places Americanism secondary to his understanding of progress. Far more important than America’s material dominance is the spread of the ideals that he believed animated its political system. More than simply manifestations of a specific way of life, liberty and democracy were transcendent goods for him, opening up the possibility for a life of one’s own choosing, and while he believed them to be best exemplified by the American experience, he saw them ultimately as integral to the full development of all people. “We believe,” he continues, switching to the prophetic plural to speak for world as a whole, “the ulterior objective of political and all other government … to be among the rest, not merely to rule … but to develop, to open to cultivation, … that aspiration for independence, and the pride and self-respect latent in all characters.”

Liberty and democracy are important to Whitman not simply because they lead merely to better political outcomes. The moral consequence of enfranchisement – the most basic of democratic principles – is a transformative experience, one that makes people equal despite their station. “To be a voter with the rest is not so much” Whitman claimed. “But to become an enfranchised man, and now, impediments removed, to stand and start without humiliation, and equal with the rest; to commence … the grand experiment of

29 Ibid., 362.
30 Ibid., 379.
development, whose end … may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman – that is
something.”

For Whitman, industrialization does not subject the world to a single national
experience or hegemonic power. Rather, by providing material resources and technology,
it encourages the development of not one nation only, but ultimately of multiple ones.

“With latest connections, works, the inter-transportation of the world,” he wrote in his
1881 “Song of the Exposition,” “These triumphs of our time, the Atlantic's delicate cable,
The Pacific railroad, the Suez canal / … Our own rondure, the current globe I bring.”

Whitman’s internationalism sees all nations brought together in the ways that people live
and work, creating a community founded on a shared industrial model that would be
broad enough to accept the diversity inherent to modern mass societies. The march
toward global industrialization would unite nations by their bonds of material interest,
creating the foundation for a more cosmopolitan world premised on American values of
freedom and democracy. “Thou, also thou, a World,” he continued, describing a future
where the world had become united, “With thy wide geographies, manifold, different,
distant, / Rounded by thee in one – one common orbic language, / One common
indivisible destiny for All.”

One of Whitman’s last long poems, “Passage to India,” published in its final form
in 1872, is an extended meditation on the relationship between nationalism and
cosmopolitanism. It portrays a fictional voyage across the United States to India and

31 Ibid., 380.
33 Ibid., 163.
beyond, highlighting the recent changes in industrial technology and providing a glimpse of the future they would create. Describing the poem to Moncure Daniel Conway, his British selling agent, Whitman wrote: “I endeavor to celebrate in my own way, the modern engineering masterpieces, the Pacific Railroad & the Suez Canal – in fact the great modern material practical energy & works –& then make of them as heights & apices whereby to reach freest, widest, loftiest spiritual fields.”34 To accomplish this goal, the poem develops three main themes, each depicting a different aspect of Whitman’s understanding of internationalism. The passage across America highlights the achievements of the United States and its special role as the progenitor of a new world. The voyage across the ocean showcases the shrinking of the world and the growing interconnectedness of peoples. Finally Whitman proclaims the promise of an interconnected globe, describing the eventual “justification” of the whole earth through industrialization.

At its opening, the poet recognizes the historical character of his project, contemplating the past not as a thing to be overcome and forgotten, but as a component of the future. The past retains importance as a place of experiences that formed a nation, of memories that make it what it is. Poised at the beginning of a new era, however, America must move forward. “The Past! the dark unfathom’d retrospect! / … For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past? / (As a projectile form’d, impell’d, passing a certain line, still keeps on, / So the present, utterly form’d, impelled by the

Armed with the assurance of this historical continuity, the author embarks on his journey. Rapidly crossing the continent by rail, Whitman celebrates the process of national unification. On his trip across the nation, he describes the “Wind river and the Wahsatch mountains ... the Monument mountain and the Eagle’s Nest, … the clear waters of Lake Tahoe … forests of majestic pines, crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, … enchanting mirages of waters and meadows.” Joining sea to sea, intercontinental railroads represent not only the quintessence of American progress but also the path to a global future. “I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad surmounting every barrier,” he continues, “I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world; / … Marking through these, and after all, in duplicate slender lines, / Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel, / Tying the Eastern to the Western sea, / The road between Europe and Asia.” This tying together of continents represented to Whitman the culmination of the previous stage of history, the Age of Exploration. With the entire nation linked by rapid travel, the Old World dream of a passage to India had been realized. Addressing Columbus, a prominent figure in his works of this period, he writes: “Ah Genoese, thy dream! thy dream! / Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave, / The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.”

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36 Ibid., 7.

37 Ibid., 7.

38 Ibid., 7. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the poet was familiar with Columbus’ remaining works or his thought in any way, the explorer becomes a symbol of Old World expansionist goals in Whitman’s work in this period, the most notable example being his 1871 poem, “Prayer of Columbus.”
Continuing, the poet embarks on a steamboat, leaving behind the past for an era of industrial interconnectedness. Whitman uses “Passage to India” to celebrate a nascent future, one he sees just over the horizon.

Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!
(No mere Doge of Venice now, wedding the Adriatic,)
I see, O Year, in you, the vast terraqueous globe, given, and giving all,
Europe to Asia, Africa join’d, and they to the New World;
The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival garland,
As brides and bridegroom hand in hand.\(^{39}\)

Invoking again the Old World dream of exploration – Renaissance Venice connecting the cities of the Adriatic – he links global expansionism to a continual process of overcoming boundaries. Just as the Portuguese and Spanish argued that their works of “exploration” and “colonization” were endorsed by God, so Whitman saw the spread of industrialization and the uniting of the world as the fulfillment of human destiny. Only through this process could the peoples of the world overcome their seemingly disparate origins and recognize their mutuality, coming together in a marriage of nations. Whitman exclaims: “Lo, soul! seest thou not God’s purpose from the first? / The earth to be spann’d, connected by net-work, / The people to become brothers and sisters, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage, / The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near, / The lands to be welded together.”\(^{40}\) Mixing metaphors, he conceptualizes the connections between nations as being, above all, indissoluble, wedded and welded, from two made together into one. However, the love of the family, like a welder’s seam, bears witness to the fact of individuality even in the face of its unifying power.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 6.
“Reckoning ahead, O soul, when thou, the time achiev’d, / (The seas all cross’s, weather’d the capes, the voyage done,) / … As, fill’d with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found, / The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.”

Although the poem begins as a depiction of a voyage, in characteristically Whitmanesque fashion it transcends physicality long before reaching its destination. Recognizing the limitations of materialism, the author moves beyond the world, beyond ordinary space and time, to contemplate the long-term implications of industrialization. Looking down on the globe, he determines that only “After the seas are all cross’d … After the great captains and engineers have accomplish’d their work” will the process be fully vindicated. More important than industrialization will be accepting its consequences, an outcome that Whitman could not fully envision. Here he reaches out for a messianic poet figure to sing this new world, and for once, it is clear he isn’t talking about himself. “After the noble inventors – after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,” he prophesizes, “Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name; / The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.” In the process of history, Whitman recognizes that in time even he will be overcome. New poets must now lead the world and shape a truly global democracy. For now, he can only point the way. “Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only! / Reckless, O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with

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41 Ibid., 14.
42 Ibid., 9.
43 Ibid., 9.
me,” He writes to this as yet unknown poet, “For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go.”

Cosmopolitanism and the Crowd

Despite his claim that the ultimate implications of American industry lay in the future, Whitman does grasp the outlines of the cosmopolitan consciousness that follows from his materialist internationalism. Fusing idealist and materialist themes, he envisioned a global democracy that would transcend localities, moving beyond nationalistic politics to a broad cosmopolitanism as advances in technology allowed for the creation of a global culture. To develop this concept, Whitman turns to the street, adopting the symbolism of the crowd to convey the political character of the industrial world.

While the crowd is a common figure in urban politics from ancient Greece to revolutionary France, industrialization had transformed and expanded it into a ubiquitous fact of modern politics. Unlike thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle, who saw in the crowd all of the dangers of demagoguery and mob rule traditionally associated with democratic government, Whitman was among the first to understand it as the defining political experience of the modern world and, as such, an inescapable element of American democracy.

By providing the site for the creation of national identities, it served as a

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44 Ibid., 15.


location where the changes in material culture are transformed into collective democratic consciousness.

Whitman’s use of the crowd in his post-Civil War work is distinct from his early depictions of the democratic experience of the street, seen most prominently in “Song of Myself.” In his late work, he uses the crowd to depict a politics characterized not by fleeting ephemeral interactions – the “promiscuous citizenship” suggested by Jason Frank – but by a deep and abiding attachment both within and between nations.47 Thus as early as 1865, writing in his “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun,” Whitman turns dramatically from the solitude of the countryside to the teeming unity of the city: “Keep your woods, O nature, and the quiet places by the woods … Give me faces and streets! … give me the streets of Manhattan!”48 Mixing military and civilian metaphors, describing soldiers on parade and spectators crowding barrooms and theaters, he depicts New York City’s reaction to the Civil War: “People, endless, streaming with strong voices, passions, pageants; / Manhattan streets with their powerful throbs, with beating drums, as now; / … Manhattan crowds the their turbulent musical chorus – with varied chorus and light of the sparkling eyes; / Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me.”49 The city, depicted here as celebrating war, becomes a scene of unity, its people a chorus singing together, making “music” as a collective political production. As a component of Whitman’s overall political thought, the crowd, represented here as “Manhattan,” is a metaphor for the nationalism that prefigured his internationalism. Yet just as the crossing the North


48 Whitman, Drum-Taps (1865), 48.

49 Ibid., 48-49.
American continent was the first step in his understanding of international interconnectedness, so was the conception of crowds as national identities only the first step in his international political theory.

Whitman outlines his more cosmopolitan understanding of the crowd in another 1865 poem, “A Broadway Pageant,” which depicts the reception of an embassy dispatched by the Tokugawa Shogunate of Japan five years earlier.50 The day’s events featured a parade attended by an estimated half-million New Yorkers (a number that would have constituted about half the city’s population at the time). Although many of those acquainted with the city, particularly the editors of the New York Times, had predicted that the crowd composed of “not the ‘prosperous’ classes only, but the ‘roughs’ of all orders and degrees” would degenerate into “a boisterous, vulgar, and scandalous riot,” Whitman felt no such fears.51 In fact on that day, according to a chastened Times, “never was New-York more free from everything like riot, more good-humored, more considerate, more fit to be held up as a model and example to the great nation of which the common consent of the world agrees with the Japanese in regarding her as the representative.”52 To Whitman, the crowd of Americans, reaching out to their new Asian allies, represented the potential for a new cosmopolitan society. Transformed by the spread of industry and communication, these two nations were brought together, a

50 Although an earlier version of this poem was published by The New York Times in 1860, under the title “The Errand Bearers,” by the time it was included in Whitman’s 1865 Drum-Taps, and subsequently in the 1867 Leaves of Grass, the poem had undergone considerable revisions. Of particular note are the changes in the author’s representation of the crowd. Gone was the fearsome hoard belching smoke and bullets with a threatening exuberance. It was replaced with an image that was at once less rowdy and more encompassing.


process that would in time spread throughout the world. “Geography, the world, is in it;” Whitman wrote, explaining the fundamental mutuality of people across the globe. “The countries there, with their populations—the millions en-masse, are curiously here; / … And I am seiz’d by them, and friendlily held by them, / Till, as here, them all I chant, Libertad! for themselves and for you.”53

Although the reception of the Japanese embassy is central to “A Broadway Pageant,” the first third of the poem focuses in large part on the image of the crowd itself as a symbol of the social changes engendered by life in the modern city. Gazing at the scene together, its members transcend their individuality, forming a collective national identity that brings people of all classes together as equals. Shifting from the many to the one, Whitman shows New York City assembled en masse, united not just in their inclusion on the street but in their shared activity of viewing. “When Broadway is entirely given up to foot-passengers and foot-standers – when the mass is densest; / When the façades of the houses are alive with people – when eyes gaze, riveted, tens of thousands at a time.”54 Watching the parade together becomes an exercise in political community. The crowd experience amalgamates individuals, accepting difference while creating unity. While the author begins “A Broadway Pageant” by surveying the crowd, describing the scene from a distance, he highlights the necessity of engaging this community by joining it. “I too, arising,” he wrote, leaving his position as neutral spectator, “answering, descend to the pavement, merge with the crowd, and gaze with

53 Whitman, Drum-Taps (1865), 63.
54 Ibid., 62.
them.” By viewing the Japanese envoy from within the crowd instead of staying above it in the more elite shop windows and apartments, Whitman welcomes its interactions, recognizing his involvement in it as central to modern democratic life. Yet for all his depiction of the crowd as an undifferentiated mass, he does not seek the extinction of the self. Instead, he believed that the atomistic individualism of liberalism must be transcended by the involvement – the immersion – of individuals in their communities. Though merged with the crowd in “A Broadway Pageant,” he never loses his distinctive voice. Even from within the mass, his words speak of his unique identity, his own vision of America’s place the world. “For I too, raising my voice, join the ranks of this pageant,” he exclaims from within the mass, “I am the chanter – I chant aloud over the pageant; / I chant the world on my Western Sea, / I chant, copious, the islands beyond, thick as stars in the sky.”

In “A Broadway Pageant,” Whitman depicts a world in transition between the isolation of Asia and the cosmopolitanism of Manhattan. Beginning with nationalist celebration, Whitman addresses his countrymen: “Superb-faced Manhattan! / Comrade Americanos! – to us, then, at last, the Orient comes.” The poem moves quickly to a depiction of America extending its industrial reach to Asia’s shores. Through the power of industrialization, previously isolated places would be opened up to the world. “I chant America, the Mistress,” he wrote, “I chant a greater supremacy; / I chant, projected, a thousand blooming cities yet, in time, on those groups of sea-islands; / I chant my sail-

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55 Ibid., 62.

56 Ibid., 64.

57 Ibid., 62.
ships and steam-ships threading the archipelagoes.”\textsuperscript{58} Whitman’s cosmopolitanism envisions a world in which Manhattan has been joined by “a thousand blooming cities,” a truly international community. With this, he moves finally to an exposition of his internationalism. Just as the crowd of the city on that day represented a new American identity, so too does the coming of Asia portend the creation of newer Asian ones, a reflection of a process that will create a new foundation for relations between nations. “I chant commerce opening, the sleep of ages having done its work—races, reborn, refresh’d; / Lives, works, resumed—the object I know not—but the old, the Asiatic resumed as it must be, / Commencing from this day, surrounded by the world.”\textsuperscript{59}

Whitman expands on his cosmopolitan image of the crowd in the postwar poem, “Year of Meteors,” in which he describes the reception of Edward, Prince of Wales in New York City. Instead of focusing on the crowd as he did in “A Broadway Pageant,” here he considers the person being viewed by the crowd. “And you would I sing, fair stripling! welcome you from me, sweet boy of England!,” he wrote, addressing the European noble as an equal. “Remember you surging Manhattan’s crowds, as you pass’d with your cortege of nobles? / There in the crowds stood I, and singled you out with attachment; / I know not why, but I loved you.”\textsuperscript{60} From the prince’s perspective, the massed people of Manhattan are an unfathomable and unapproachable collectivity. Even the poem’s speaker is a blurred face amongst thousands. Yet the crowd presents an opportunity for intimacy for Whitman. He sees the prince, knows him, and even,

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 51.
inexplicably, loves him. By bringing people together, uniting them in location and purpose, the crowd absorbs all comers, bidding them to become, in essence, America. Whitman embodies this function of the crowd in his poem, inviting the prince to give up his place and join them. Elaborating on the idea of cosmopolitanism as a sharing of identity in his 1872 revision of “Song of Myself,” Whitman moves beyond the depiction of specific crowds to a more theoretical understanding in which he refers to himself as “a Kosmos, of mighty Manhattan.” By linking the words “Kosmos” – which shares the same linguistic root as cosmopolitan – and Manhattan – his term for the collected city as a crowd – he identifies the people assembled together as having the potential to stretch out beyond themselves, to encompass their neighbors and fellows. In doing so, they create the linkages necessary to create an international community.

Although Whitman continued to refine his thought throughout the rest of his life, he never fully resolved the tension between his nationalist and imperialist assumptions and his internationalist and cosmopolitan ones. He recognized this fact in a conversation late in his life with his friend and eventual literary executor, Horace Traubel. “There is a sense in which I want to be cosmopolitan,” admitted Whitman, “then again [there is] a sense in which I make much of patriotism.” But to the extent that he does see the possibility of reconciliation, it lay in a cosmopolitan culture that would emerge after the world’s unification by industry. In effect, Whitman’s materialist internationalism made possible the world in which his idealistic cosmopolitanism would thrive. While the

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61 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1872), 54.

spread of industry creates the potential for a global community, only the power of culture can unite otherwise disparate people in meaningful political ways. “[G]ood theology, good art, or good literature, has certain features shared in common,” Whitman wrote about the power of culture to unify. “The combination fraternizes, ties the races – is, in many particulars, under laws applicable indifferently to all, … and, from whatever source, appeals to emotions, pride, love, spirituality, common to humankind.” Whitman believed that the future could no longer be considered nationally, with one destiny for France, another for America, and yet another for India. People’s lives had become intertwined, and politics must now reflect the fact that through industrialization, the world is destined to be united: “One common indivisible destiny for All.”

Conclusion

Whitman’s internationalism represents an unappreciated component of his political thought. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the United States who romanticized the rural agrarian past, Whitman confronted the challenges of modernity directly. Fusing idealist and materialist thought, he considered the future as a product of industrialization as it spread across the globe. In the expansion of the telegraph and rail transit, he saw a transformation of the political sphere towards greater connectedness. But

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64 Whitman, Leaves of Grass (1881-1882), 163.
the process he depicted would span many lifetimes, and it is only with the proliferation of the internet and social media in recent years that the whole earth has truly been “spann’d, connected by net-work,” and his vision come to full fruition. More important, Whitman believed that in this interconnection of the globe, there was the potential for the spread of democratic ideals, which would allow not only the overturning of outdated political relationships but also encourage the full development of human capacities. This paradigmatic shift from the old world to the new characterizes the central point of Whitman’s internationalist thought. Beyond questions of national power, he was concerned with international progress, and while he saw America as the harbinger of modernity, he believed that the whole world would ultimately be transformed through the power of industry. “Are all nations communing?,” he asked in “Years of the Modern,” an 1865 poem, “is there going to be but one heart to the globe? / Is humanity forming en-masse?”

More relevant than ever, Whitman’s message calls out to America to face the challenges of today’s rapidly globalizing world. While the spread of industrialization has connected much of the world, it has also expanded the scope of the challenges facing it. Problems such as global warming, nuclear proliferation, and economic and social injustice present themselves not to one nation alone but to all. Whitman would suggest that while industrialization has created these challenges, it also has provided the tools to solve them by transforming not only the ways that people live but also the ways that they relate to each other. The lesson of his internationalism does not rest in his support of a

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66 Ibid., 374.
specific form of political architecture or the expression of citizenship in any particular form, but in the understanding of politics in the modern world as a decidedly international phenomenon. Increasingly the nations of the world are connected and in constant interaction, and through these connections, Whitman believed a community capable of global action could be born. When “All these separations and gaps shall be taken up, and hook'd and link'd together,” he predicted in “Passage to India,” “The whole Earth—this cold, impassive, voiceless Earth, shall be completely justified.”67

Nor should we forget that Whitman’s internationalism requires America to be a leader, a cosmopolitan force in the world. As the first modern nation, it is the vanguard to a world where inequality, subjugation, and violence has been transcended, and the true potential of humankind fulfilled. He describes its role in his preface to the 1872 edition of Leaves of Grass: “not to become a conqueror nation, or to achieve the glory of mere military, or diplomatic, or commercial superiority … to become the most friendly nation, (the United States indeed) – the modern composite nation.”68

67 Ibid., 9.

Conclusion: Whitman’s Legacy

Although he is one of the most influential American authors of the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman has been seen too seldom as a democratic political theorist. Scholars who have analyzed his work have generally focused more on his literary accomplishments than his political thinking. And to the extent that political theorists have considered Whitman at all, they generally have characterized him as an idiosyncratic liberal individualist. By considering Whitman’s work as it developed throughout his career, this project has attempted to investigate several of the most important themes in his democratic theory. In doing so, it has revealed the extent to which he challenged many of the categories that have been used to classify him. Thus it has argued that he was neither entirely individualistic nor totally nationalistic in his political thinking. It has claimed that his attitudes about post-Civil War democracy must be situated as much in a narrative of decline and renewal as in a story of unlimited progress. And it has contended that his idealism cannot be understood without recognizing his corresponding materialism, and that his later work reveals a deep internationalism that accompanies his faith in industry and technology. Taken together, these studies have shown Whitman to be a serious if at times inconsistent democratic theorist whose work explored many of the central components of democracy in his day.

Following work done by recent biographers, this study had considered Whitman’s political thought as it responded to the challenges of mid-nineteenth century America,
including not only the Civil War, but also the shift to a modern party and political system and the rise of industrial capitalism.\(^1\) Although he published seven different editions of *Leaves of Grass* over his lifetime, in many respects they must be considered as a separate works. The political concerns that animated its first edition in 1855 and those that defined the final “deathbed” version of 1892 were quite different. Over the almost forty years in between, he published five more editions, each a different articulation of his democratic theory. Thus to analyze his early poetry alongside his later prose has the potential to radically mischaracterize his thought, and care must be taken to properly contextualize his thinking. By contrast, a careful reading of his work in conversation with historical events opens up the potential to understand the broader democratic themes that dominated his political thought throughout his career.

For Whitman, democratic identity transcends both individualist and nationalist interpretations. Instead he characterizes it as a reciprocal process of construction between citizens and the communities in which they live. Developing a theory I term poetic nationalism, he likens people to works of art, constantly under production and revision in response to personal introspection and social interaction. Standing between activity and receptivity, Whitman’s speaker in *Leaves of Grass* develops a conception of the self characterized by a process of *poiesis* that recognizes identity, both individual and national, as a product of continual construction and reconstruction. Thus his most famous poem, “Song of Myself,” can be seen as a narrative about the creation of the democratic individual. The initially unidentified speaker first absorbs the people of America into his

collective body and then spins them back out in a symbolic act of nation building. Through this process of mutual construction, Whitman depicts identity in the United States as a deeply democratic and interactive process. As America marched towards civil war, he expanded this concept of poetic nationalism, desperately attempting to prevent division by elaborating a dense notion of national affection. In his 1860 revisions of *Leaves of Grass*, specifically the *Calamus* and *Chants Democratic* clusters, he laid the foundations for this new sort of political love. Echoing the tripartite division between *eros*, *philios*, and *agape*, he developed three specific models for political love as the basis for social and political unity. First, in the erotic encounter, he sees more than a purely physical act, recognizing the potentiality for love – even between strangers – as a means of connection. Second, in his depictions of filial love, he highlights the power of shared national goals as a basis for lasting camaraderie between citizens. Finally, he describes the unconditional agapeistic love that he felt for his fellow Americans, presenting it as a model for the nation. Taken together, the multifaceted conception of love developed in the antebellum *Leaves of Grass* attempts to serve as the basis for an affective union that would provide cultural foundations for the institutional structure of the Constitution.

The years after the Civil War challenged Whitman’s sanguine political hopes found in his earlier works. As a result, he increasingly engaged in a narrative of democratic decline and renewal. Specifically, he denounced three manifestations of decline: corruption, hypocrisy, and soullessness. Corruption represented a systematic rejection of public interest by both political and business leaders. As elites increasingly favored the private good, Whitman saw government as increasingly coopted in the service of narrow factional interests, a process that he argued threatened to enervate the
democratic potential of the people. Hypocrisy in postwar America was manifested by a
disjunction between the beliefs embodied by the nation’s democratic principles and its
policies. Exhibited most clearly in the failure of America to enact full enfranchisement, it
weakened the moral capacities of the nation and rendered the people politically passive.
Soullessness arose from the lack of a shared national culture to serve as a foundation for
unity. Looking to public intellectuals, Whitman claimed that America was still bound to
political practices of domination and submission that it had inherited from feudal Europe.
In response, he developed a logic of democratic renewal that recognized in the people the
power to address the causes of decline. Opposing the corruption of elites, he interposed
the virtue of the people exercised in democratic practice. Against hypocrisy, he
prophesied a new democratic civil religion. Finally, in response to America’s
soullessness, he proposed the creation of a class of political poets whose task it would be
to inculcate democratic principles. Altogether, Whitman’s logic of decline and renewal
calls for the creation of a new democratic culture that would serve as the foundation for a
radically egalitarian and democratic society.

Finally, following the war, Whitman began to transcend his nation-centered
thinking and developed a more internationalist vision. Although often described as a
Hegelian idealist, he included substantial materialist elements in his work as he neared
the end of his career. In the rise of industrial capitalism he recognized both dangers and
opportunities. With the creation of new technologies of communication and technology,
he saw the potential for the growth of global community, eliminating both temporal and
spatial barriers and allowing the world to be joined into a global community. Admittedly,
Whitman’s vision was rooted in the American experience, and therefore had implicitly
imperialist foundations. But his project was only nationalist in a limited sense, since it sought ultimately to transcend the nation in favor of an understanding of politics consisting of global communities united by a shared cosmopolitan culture. In his later works, he discusses the global implications of American expansion, using the concept of the crowd to depict the development of an increasingly cosmopolitan world. His internationalism speaks to a future unbounded by the limitations imposed by space and time. Connected across the world, people at last could greet each other as equals, recognizing their political commonalities.

Underpinning Whitman’s political thought is the larger theme of democratic culture. America, he argued, would not “surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism” merely on the strength of the Constitution alone.\(^2\) There must be something deeper to create a nation out of such disparate people. By recognizing the shared and often deficient foundation of national identity, he calls on his readers to be attentive to the role of political culture in their lives. The media they consume, he argues, should reinforce the values of the social and political system, creating better, more connected citizens and neighbors. “Are there, indeed, men here worthy the name?,” he asked, critiquing American culture in *Democratic Vistas*. “Is there a pervading atmosphere of beautiful manners? Are there crops of fine youths, and majestic old persons? Are there arts worthy freedom and a rich people? Is there a great moral and religious civilization – the only justification of a great material one?”\(^3\) Peoples are made not by institutions but by the

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\(^3\) Ibid., 371.
lives they share, the stories they tell, the heroes they venerate, and the practices that make up their daily lives. By depicting political identity as he does, he develops a democratic theory that recognizes politics as a component of a larger whole, not a set of practices but rather a fully envisioned way of life in which people understand themselves as individuals intimately connected to a larger democratic community.

Today Whitman would ask us to examine the content of our own contemporary culture. Although we live in a different age, our culture is subject to many of the same criticisms he had of his own. Sensationalist images and trivial matters fill our media, teaching Americans to value celebrity and wealth rather than community. Looking at our times, Whitman would be hard-pressed not to reprise his critique. “Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States,” he wrote. “Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in… nor is humanity itself believ'd in. … A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. … Conversation is a mass of badinage.”

By the same token, he would call on us, as he did on Americans of his own time, to recognize that through our culture we are made one, and by our participation we decide who we will be as a people. Thus we collectively choose whether we become vain and trivial, or the robust democrats that he desired.

Whitman’s democratic theory has a great deal to offer contemporary scholars. Writing during the mid-nineteenth century – a period characterized by deeply divisive politics – he responds to a set of concerns that are not altogether different those facing

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4 Ibid., 369-370.
America today. Then as now, regional interest and ferocious partisanship dominated politics and demoralized the people, encouraging popular disengagement and apathy. In response, Whitman looked outside traditional channels of political power, urging Americans to recognize the source of their identity in a common democratic culture. By depicting this culture, he challenged his readers to recognize the dense web of interconnections that characterized their lives, calling on them to become more aware, not only of themselves but also of their fellow citizens. For those of us who study him today, he offers a similar challenge, to expand the tools available for dealing with deficiencies of democracy, while recognizing the connections shared between people not only in America but across the globe.
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