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## “THESE TERRIBLE 30 OR 40 HOURS”: WASHINGTON AT THE BATTLE OF BROOKLYN IN WHITMAN’S “THE SLEEPERS” AND “BROOKLYNIANA” MANUSCRIPTS

KIMBERLY WINSCHEL BANION

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ON NOVEMBER 19, 1888, Walt Whitman’s chronicler and long-time friend Horace Traubel found it worthwhile to record a conversation regarding a “strange little Washington-Lincoln photo” kept on the mantelpiece at Whitman’s Camden home: “It represents Lincoln as being welcomed into the cloudlands and throwing his arms about Washington, who with a disengaged hand offers to put a wreath on Lincoln’s brow.”<sup>1</sup> When Traubel questions Whitman about the “queer” photo, the poet laughs, replying, “Everybody seems of the same mind—everybody but me: I value it: yet I could hardly tell why: probably because it made a favorable impression on me at the start” (Traubel, 3:134). Whitman explains that he kept the picture on his desk while in Washington, D.C., and the clerks he worked with also failed to see its value, the chief clerk finding it “a cheap thing” (3:134). The poet acknowledges, “It is an old idea: a sort of Tom Paine Voltaire idea—the welcome to the shade” (3:134-135). Whitman’s immediate attraction to what many others saw as a cheap, overly sentimental, even queer, depiction could be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps the photo represents his idyllic Calamus love, the effect heightened because it is carried out between two Presidents and serves as an example of the possibility of affectionate comradeship between men. Perhaps the poet’s intense connection to Lincoln drew him to the promise of the martyr’s glorified place among the founders of the country. Or perhaps Whitman’s own words provide a clue: it represents “an old idea” and, by placing Lincoln in its context, connects the ideals of the American Revolution with the present generation.

The photo Traubel and Whitman look upon in that moment is one of the several versions of Stephen J. Ferris’s lithograph *Lincoln with Washington (Apotheosis)* (1865), which was mass produced and disseminated as a carte-de-visite following Lincoln’s assassination.<sup>2</sup> Whitman’s early contact with the mythos of the Revolutionary War, along with his regard for Lincoln and belief in Unionism, would make Ferris’s rendering particularly appealing. The photo displayed on

Whitman's mantel in Camden supports a view of historical continuity between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, a continuity that antebellum America was seeking long before images of Lincoln posed beside a bust of Washington were used to advertise the 1860 Republican Presidential Nominee.<sup>3</sup>

In the decade leading up to the Civil War, pro-slavery, anti-slavery, and neutral factions were in a multi-media rhetorical turf battle that sought to define the leaders of the American Revolution's positions on Unionism, slavery, and states' rights. At stake in this battle was the right to redefine what the Revolutionary War and its heroes should mean to a divided nation. Not surprisingly, all sides in the slavery debate actively sought to align themselves with the principles and spirit of the founders of the nation. Washington's Farewell Address, first published September 19, 1796, is a touchstone for this brand of political rhetoric. In part of the address, Washington (and those who helped craft the address) exhorts the people to put national identity before regional interests: "The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations."<sup>4</sup> In the battle over slavery and states' rights, both Northern and Southern factions accused the other of ignoring Washington's warning against placing region above nation. Certainly, Whitman was cognizant of the inherent political connotations of evoking the American Revolution in general, or Washington specifically, in the divisive national climate in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Although not all references to and representations of Washington in the antebellum period were presented as overtly political, their ubiquity suggests a shared cultural shift in the nation's thinking about portrayals of him. In fact, the number of biographies of the first president rose steeply in the decade in which *Leaves of Grass* was first published. In "Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington," sociologist Barry Schwartz finds that the antebellum era had a strong appetite for Washington biographies; approximately sixty-two to sixty-four biographies were newly published or reprinted in each of the first four decades of the nineteenth century (excepting the 1820s, when there was a decline).<sup>5</sup> In the 1850s, the number rose steeply, with eighty-six biographies printed or reprinted (Schwartz, 223). It seems counterintuitive that the height of Washington biographical production was not during the Washington centennial in 1832 or the American centennial in 1876. Instead, writers and consumers were most focused on Washington as a topic for biography in the years leading up to the Civil War, a time in which the nation looked backward to the American Revolution and to Washington's leadership for answers to the looming national crisis.

Thus, antebellum writers were not simply retelling Washington's life story but were fashioning new perspectives from which to understand his military, personal, and presidential legacy. According to historian Garry Wills, the first generation of Washington biographies interpreted his life as a secular version of the story of Moses and the Promised Land.<sup>6</sup> This particular interpretation, however, did not seem to resonate with the American consciousness. Wills argues that Mason Locke "Parson" Weems's popular biography, first published in 1800, was vital in terms of creating a shared secular vision of Washington (Wills, 35-37). Though many literary critics have treated Weems's influential piece as a sentimental work, Wills argues that his biography is an attempt to modify classical tales (such as Cincinnatus) for an American audience: "Weems gives us the meaning of Washington in a set of symbols, not following narrative logic at all. He was not recording events, but fashioning an icon" (Wills, 37). Though Wills convincingly argues that Weems's intent was to draw upon eighteenth-century secular sensibilities and classical models, the popular legacy of his biography may well be due to the fact that its sentimental elements were appealing to antebellum audiences. Barbara J. Mitnick finds that mid-nineteenth-century artists in both literary and visual arts began to focus on Washington's personal side, creating stories and images that portrayed his courtship, marriage, and family life.<sup>7</sup> As Mitnick observes, in the service of representing historical "truthfulness", these representations were often anachronistic; for example, many popular prints placed the Washington family in a parlor setting of the 1840s (Mitnick, 63). In direct conflict with the stoic and reserved personality for which Washington is known, antebellum artists of all media preferred to map sentimentality and domesticity onto these earlier neoclassical representations.

As might seem characteristic of the poet, Whitman appears to have been aware of the multiple interpretations around him, yet does not privilege any particular version of Washington as he recounts the Battle of Brooklyn in his writings. Neither was Whitman unaware of the fact that mid-century writers were ahistorical or inaccurate in their depictions of the first president, as Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* makes apparent. On at least two occasions, the poet muses on his personal distaste for Washington's character, describing him at one point as "stiff and stately."<sup>8</sup> Also, in an early piece written for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Whitman writes about Washington during a skirmish in Long Island in a much different way than he presents him in his later writings, describing the general as losing his temper, cursing, and threatening possible deserters with a gun.<sup>9</sup> The range of Whitman's commentaries and writings suggest that he was steeped in various accurate and inaccurate portrayals of the general and did not hesitate to offer his own conflicting mythologies.

What is exceptional about Whitman's treatment of Washington is not that it is more or less accurate or more or less sentimental than contemporary writers' depictions; what stands apart is his recurring focus on Washington's defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn and other scenes of loss as the defining moments of the future president's and the fledgling nation's legacy. As I will argue, this focus is particularly clear in the sections featuring Washington in the poem that came to be known as "The Sleepers." The poem is in keeping with the overall thematic trajectory of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, reinforcing the concept that a democratic nation's history is one of simultaneous redemption and need for redemption. Additionally, an examination of his treatment of Washington in the unpublished manuscripts known as "Brooklyniana" reinforces and extends what "The Sleepers" can tell us of his view of Washington's defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn. Just as Whitman simultaneously acknowledges and transcends divisions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and geography, in his treatment of the Battle of Brooklyn he also acknowledges and transcends the ways in which linear history binds us to limited visions of our democratic past, present, and future. By framing Washington's famous defeat as an ever-occurring event, Whitman places the nation within a cyclical narrative of victory-in-loss, one that unites Washington and Lincoln in a redeeming embrace.

While the Battle of Brooklyn section of "The Sleepers" is a popular subject of critical study, and other Whitman poems dealing with the Revolution such as "A Boston Ballad" and "The Centenarian's Story" are well known, the "Brooklyniana" manuscripts are still largely unstudied, and many questions remain about their origin.<sup>10</sup> They were apparently archived in the Library of Congress under the title "Brooklyniana" because they were assumed to be manuscripts related to the series of *Brooklyn Standard* articles Whitman published under the same title from June 1861 through November 1862.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, there does appear to be at least a provisional connection between the two. For example, in the manuscript files, information on the monetary system of Long Island American Indians appears in article number four of the *Brooklyn Standard* series.<sup>12</sup> While similar topics and even some of the same facts are covered in both the manuscript notes and the articles, a direct connection between the two is not apparent. On the whole, the "Brooklyniana" manuscripts are notes, many drawn from historical studies on topics such as the Battle of Brooklyn, the settlement of New York, slavery in Long Island, and Dutch European history, all of which could have been collected for any number of purposes.<sup>13</sup> One possibility is that the historical timelines and factual notes in the manuscript file were gathered for a project mentioned in the inaugural article in the *Brooklyn Standard* series: "We do not design to undertake, at present,

a sketch of the early settlement of Brooklyn by the Dutch, although we purpose doing so in another of our papers—or in some other form—for it is in every way worthy of being preserved, for the use of future Brooklynites.”<sup>14</sup> It is possible that the manuscript notes were taken toward this purpose, though that cannot be ascertained from the writings themselves. Other pieces of the manuscript are personal commentaries on the importance of the Battle of Brooklyn, part of which echoes the language used to describe the event in “The Sleepers” and “The Centenarian’s Story.”<sup>15</sup> At least two pages appear to contain plans for future poems. The variety of topics, the different sizes and types of paper, the corrections made with different types of writing tools, and the current lack of time line for the pieces make pinning down any exact category for the manuscripts difficult. What can most certainly be said, however, is that they add to the ways in which one interprets Whitman’s treatment of Washington and its connection to the poet’s democratic views. Many pages of the manuscript are dedicated to details of the Battle of Brooklyn, some of them elaborating, in greater detail than in published writings, on the importance of the retreat after Washington’s defeat. It also appears that Whitman was planning to write a poem, or an addition to an existing poem, treating Washington’s return to Brooklyn as President in 1792. These manuscript pieces make clear that Whitman had more to say on the relevance of the Battle of Brooklyn than he revealed in published pieces.

The most commonly cited instance of Whitman’s treatment of Washington, however, occurs in the Revolutionary War sequence in “The Sleepers.” This section of the poem consists of two stanzas: in the first, Whitman focuses on the slaughter of the actual battle; in the second, he describes Washington’s parting from his troops at the end of the war. The first half concerns itself with a scene of temporary defeat; the second with ultimate victory tainted by loss. In both, Washington is the central character and the focus of the narrative. The first section describes the general’s suffering as he witnesses the carnage of battle:

Now of the old war-days . . . the defeat at Brooklyn;  
Washington stands inside the lines . . . he stands on the entrenched hills amid a crowd  
of officers,  
His face is cold and damp . . . . he cannot repress the weeping drops . . . . he lifts the  
glass perpetually to his eyes . . . . the color is blanched from his cheeks,  
He sees the slaughter of the southern braves confided to him by their parents.<sup>16</sup>

In this scene, the poet’s focus on Washington in defeat speaks to a need to reinterpret the legacy of American democracy. Here we see Washington in a state of anxiety and despair. Inside the lines of battle yet separated by rank, the general can only weep and watch as the “southern

braves” are overtaken. Whitman chooses to focus on Washington at his most impotent; unable to do anything to affect the outcome of the battle, he is cast in a feminized role as he waits for the outcome with damp face and blanched cheeks. By emphasizing Washington’s powerlessness as he watched the disaster unfold before his eyes, Whitman also takes power away from the political rhetoric of the 1850s that sought to “claim” the nation’s founder. In the moment Whitman presents, Washington is not the great inspirer of troops or leader in battle, but rather a passive figure who weeps over the fate of his brave soldiers. As such, the scene serves as a reflection on the general’s sorrow rather than his role as an agent of national unity.

In current scholarship, fleeting claims have been made regarding the contemporary sources for Whitman’s poetic accounts of Washington in this particular scene of “The Sleepers.” In *The Ecstatic Whitman*, George Hutchinson specifically analyzes the Battle of Brooklyn scene as Whitman’s response to other biographical accounts of the fight: “Whitman apparently has taken John Marshall’s more stoic version of the episode and infused it with a tone and imagery typical of Weems, who did not describe the battle.”<sup>17</sup> Various scholars have made other claims about the scene’s origins: Alan Trachtenberg asserts that the account was drawn from oral culture, and Betsy Erkkila suggests the scenes are drawn from Joel Tyler Headley’s *Washington and his Generals* while also incorporating the sentimentality of Weems.<sup>18</sup> Though biographies Whitman read or had access to may have been influential, a direct comparison of the language and record of events does not suggest that one single source had a direct influence on the way in which he represented Washington in his writing. The events Whitman describes are accounted for in a wide variety of historical sources from the period, and it appears that Whitman took liberties with the accounts he might have read and heard.

One particular event that varies from the bulk of contemporary accounts is Washington’s farewell in the tavern, which tended to be a key scene in many biographies. In Whitman’s account in “The Sleepers,” the scene becomes a space of equality and brotherhood. Perhaps foreshadowing his conception of Calamus love between males, Washington greets the soldiers who have fought so bravely for him with affection and, once again, tears:

The same at last and at last when peace is declared,  
He stands in the room of the old tavern . . . the wellbeloved soldiers all pass through,  
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,  
The chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek,  
He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another . . . he shakes hands and bids  
goodbye to the army. (*PP*, 112)

Interestingly, in both stanzas Whitman uses Indian-inflected terms such as “braves” and “chief” to describe the Southern soldiers and Washington. He favored the term “brave” as a substitute for “soldier” in parts of *Specimen Days*, conferring it as a high compliment of personal courage, usually in the face of tragedy or defeat.<sup>19</sup> He also refers to Washington as “chief” in his Battle of Brooklyn descriptions in the unpublished “Brooklyniana” manuscripts in a section that happens to use language similar to that which is used in “The Sleepers” and “The Centenarian’s Story.” While his terminology here may not be exceptional for the poet, it is telling in that it re-imagines the highly-stratified military hierarchy on different terms during this important moment. The simpler model of hierarchy he presents here—brave and chief—may have been more appealing to the poet, who during the Civil War critiqued military hierarchy as unfit for democracy (*PP*, 767-768). The second stanza does mention one level of traditional military hierarchy by distinguishing between soldiers and officers, but just by placing the two in the same room the poet makes an anti-hierarchical statement.

In fact, the detail of who is at the tavern is what makes Whitman’s account different from those of many contemporaries. Biographers’ accounts of Washington’s farewell vary, and it appears to be true that Washington did say goodbye to his men at a tavern before leaving for Virginia. What other accounts make clear, however, is that Washington met only with his officers at this venue.<sup>20</sup> In striking contrast to most contemporary accounts, then, Whitman describes the “wellbeloved soldiers” bidding goodbye to the general first, suggesting that common soldiers, not just officers, were at the tavern. The fact that the officers are described as “wait[ing] their turn” further indicates that more than just the higher levels of the army were present at the tavern. Additionally, the fact that the officers wait for the soldiers is a reversal of the military hierarchy. Without the pomp and rank of military parades, the great general meets his soldiers as equals. Finally, Whitman describes Washington as embracing and kissing the soldiers, much like he is positioned with Lincoln in the photo Whitman would later admire. Certainly, a person of Washington’s rank and character would be more accustomed to being bowed to; the democratic handshake coupled with the physicality and emotionality of an embrace makes a strong claim for the general’s role as a proponent of equality and paternal care. Whitman positions Washington in a role reminiscent of other sentimental antebellum depictions of the first President; yet his vision differs in that it seeks to erase divisions of rank to form a more inclusive, less hierarchical version of military life. In his belief that the “genius of the United States” is “always most in the common people” (*PP*, 5-6), Whitman rewrites the scene of Washington’s farewell within a democratic space, where man meets man on equal terms rather than on terms of rank.

Scholars have offered wide-ranging views on Whitman's incorporation of the Revolutionary War in "The Sleepers." Joyce Kornblatt has argued that the scenes with Washington in "The Sleepers" represent the poet's attempts to humanize history and make past events relevant to his contemporaries.<sup>21</sup> In a more historical approach, George Hutchinson has connected Whitman's interest in the Revolution to the larger antebellum anxiety that the heroic days of the nation were over, and that writers such as Whitman were attempting to reframe the Revolutionary period in order to rediscover heroism for a "postheroic generation" (Hutchinson, 8). Hutchinson argues that Whitman depicts Washington as the "embodiment of both maternal and paternal concern" (4); thus, the general enacts the same tender relationships in "The Sleepers" that Whitman would later enact in his work at Civil War hospitals (Hutchinson, 5). David S. Reynolds has added to this line of argument by connecting the poet's references to the Revolutionary War with the divisiveness of contemporary politics and his project to bring the nation together in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "He established between the competing political interpretations of the Revolution a humanistic, poetic middle ground, stressing the bravery of Northerners and Southerners united against a common enemy, and the tears of a very human Washington as he gathered his soldiers in comradely embrace."<sup>22</sup>

Whitman's desire to make the events of the American Revolution fresh and relevant to his contemporaries was shared by many mid-century writers. As I have been arguing, Whitman's representations of the more human, personal aspects of Washington's life are in keeping with his contemporaries and do not provide a radical view of the first president that no one had attempted before. What sets Whitman's representations apart from his contemporaries in these depictions of Washington is his focus on specific moments of defeat and loss as critical pieces of the democratic experience. In these scenes, Washington is at his most powerless and vulnerable: he watches helplessly as his soldiers are slaughtered; he spends the following forty-eight hours tortured by the thought of capture, court martial, and death; and he makes a tearful goodbye to his soldiers and officers. Even the final victory at the end of the war comes at a price: the scene in which Washington says farewell to his troops marks the ending of the brotherhood and democratic fervor of the war.

Whitman's representation of Washington in the poem that came to be known as "The Sleepers" and in other poems and prose, including the unpublished "Brooklyniana" manuscripts, treats the Battle of Brooklyn specifically and the Revolutionary War in general not simply as historically relevant events from the past, but as events taking place in an ever-occurring present. The general's personal actions immedi-

ately after defeat, in Whitman's view, are critical to the outcome of the nation in that it places the patriots' cause on the path toward the cycle of democratic redemption instead of powerlessness and despotism. This redemption, however, is never complete. In fact, Whitman clearly outlines his views on how the American bard should make use of the past in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*:

Past and present and future are not disjointed but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson . . . he places himself where the future becomes present. The greatest poet does not only dazzle his rays over character and scenes and passions . . . he finally ascends and finishes all . . . he exhibits the pinnacles that no man can tell what they are for or what is beyond . . . he glows a moment on the extremest verge. (*PP*, 13)

Thus, both past and future become the present in the poet's vision. This fluid relationship with national past, present, and future is particularly observable in the scenes involving Washington in "The Sleepers" in that Whitman redefines the past in a way that "ascends and finishes" the interpretation of the Revolutionary War. From the heightened perspective of the pinnacle, the past, present, and future are joined in one unified vision.

Whitman's fluid concept of time has often been noted by scholars, and part of his sense of temporality has been attributed to his strong connection with the Revolution. Reynolds says of Whitman's literary obsession with the Battle of Brooklyn that, "in a corner of his capacious mind, it was always August 27, 1776; the British were always invading; the rebel troops were always dying bravely" (Reynolds, 12). Steven John Mack applies Whitman's conflation of time and space in *Leaves of Grass* to an overtly political purpose, claiming that the poet "sift[s] the past for usable mythological or linguistic forms from which he might construct a vision to guide the continuous process of social reconstruction in an ever-receding future."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the devices Whitman used to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy create what Mack considers "an alternate temporal logic" that enables history to be made open to various interpretations and, therefore, political agendas. In framing the Battle of Brooklyn as a contemporary event by placing it in his poetic "Now," Whitman relegates the time frame of the event to the democratic present.

The "Brooklyniana" manuscripts reinforce and extend this interpretation of "The Sleepers" by emphasizing loss as a defining experience in the fledgling democracy. Expounding upon the gap between the two Revolutionary War stanzas in "The Sleepers," Whitman reflects more

deeply upon the moments after the defeat and Washington’s agony afterward. The pages are numbered at the top (though the numbering system seems to be inconsistent), suggesting that these pieces were a part of a longer narrative. On a page numbered “3,” Whitman writes:

The more I have thought it over, the more I am convinced that the few days, perhaps the few hours, following this battle, ~~were hold-the were-the held-the~~ ~~decis formed the most serious and held~~ <sup>hold held</sup> the most momentous and weighty consequences <sup>^</sup> of any in the life of Washington and in the destinies of These States. —All ~~hung[?] in~~ was in jeopardy— <sup>^</sup> —or rather indeed all now was over. ~~all~~ <sup>indeed</sup> <sup>^</sup> seemed fated; the revolution thus must ~~should~~ <sup>should</sup> end, ~~was to be~~ amounting to nothing, after all.—<sup>24</sup>

The Battle of Brooklyn, as Whitman conceives it in this manuscript, is not simply a battle in which Washington suffers or learns a lesson; it is a few days suspended in time in which all believed the Revolutionary cause was lost. Whitman’s struggle with verb tense in this passage seems to indicate uncertainty about how to describe these events. He oscillates between *hold* and *held*, suggesting indeterminacy in whether the events were critical or remain critical in the narrative of the fledgling United States. Similar moments of indeterminacy occur later in the passage, as Whitman struggles to express how the result of the crushing loss was viewed. Here, he appears indecisive about how to express the people’s sense of defeat: must the revolution end, was it to be ended, or should it end?

Early in the manuscripts, Whitman focuses on Washington’s resolve as the force that changes the course of the Revolution. Much like the Washington of “The Centenarian’s Story,” it is the general’s personal determination and cunning that saves the patriots. On pages numbered “4” and “5,” he provides more detail on this point:

4

~~But now~~ <sup>For then</sup> arose the cautiousness, combination, and undaunted mettle of the Washington.— In dismay, in the toils in the hours of rain and darkness <sup>he and saved the American cause</sup> He ~~it—surely was that~~ planned the ~~masterly~~ <sup>retreat to Manhattan Island</sup> .—  
Alert, <sup>^</sup> Sleepless, stern, impassive, he ~~wrought it~~ decided upon this step, took the

practical means for accomplishing it and was with <sup>his own</sup> vigilant eyes overlooked the final performance of it.— He stood at the ferry landing (now Fulton ferry, Brooklyn side,) re-sending orders, receiving

5

intelligence, encouraging the despondent.—and It was the <sup>minutes</sup> What grander hours were they there ever in the life of George Washington than they?—He stood at the landing all that critical night— and when daylight he was still there at day-break, and more than an hour afterward.—He was one of the last to leave the Brooklyn shore.— It is at this occurrence and time I have had <sup>decided</sup> represented in the frontis piece of this the present book]

Though Washington has lost the battle, these manuscript pages cast him as the hero. Washington saves the day with his decisiveness and tenacity. As page five suggests, Whitman was conceiving a project in which Washington's retreat at Brooklyn would be a key introductory image of the work. The visualization of this retreat appears to be a central concern of Whitman's at this point in the manuscript, perhaps because it focuses on a scene of victory-in-loss, a point I will elaborate on later.

Other pages in the manuscript packet are even more intriguing, which include passages that engage the general's subjectivity in a way that "The Sleepers" or "The Centenarian's Story" do not. Rather than focusing on Washington's heroic resolve or the success of the retreat, here Whitman meditates on Washington's indecision and the turmoil and agony the general faced during the daring attempt:

This was <sup>one of</sup> the most important points in Washington's life— I think it was the most important of any.— His suspense and excitement were intense.— His army <sup>men</sup> pride quelled by the prestige of the royal force— of the two generals he relied upon one prostrated by a ghastly sickness, the other <sup>his</sup> General taken prisoner— <sup>his</sup> some of his choicest <sup>companies</sup> regiments slaughtered— —in the officers' tents <sup>distracted</sup> counsels—among the men <sup>profound</sup> dismay and hourly defections—the kings artillery on one side and the deep and swift waters of the sea <sup>the</sup> East River on the other side—the heavens weeping and

dark <sup>black</sup> above him—what must have rot-passed through the brain of Washington!  
 [[illegible] What two days and nights they must have been to him!

At this point on the page, a line is drawn to divide the narrative at the top of the page (which has a single diagonal line drawn through it) and the portion below. On the lower half of the page, Whitman again struggles to articulate Washington's inner state:

the imminent[?] <sup>momentary</sup> danger of attack-assault on ~~the~~ his lines—the  
 consideration[?] <sup>thought</sup> of defeat and imprisonment, perhaps a <sup>British</sup> court  
 martial and a <sup>prompt</sup> halter—such marked the situation of Washington at this  
 fearful <sup>that</sup> black and <sup>memor</sup> ~~period~~: <sup>memorable</sup> night? — these terrible thirty or  
 forty hours

Whitman approaches, and only tentatively enters, the subjectivity of Washington himself. Gone is the heroic decisiveness Washington displays in other passages of Whitman's writing. Here, it is the general's suffering during the hours of uncertainty and indecision that are important. Key to his presentation of this historical moment is the way in which he seeks to dissolve the historical past into the present by a close analysis of the general's emotions and thoughts. By privileging the emotional weight of the decision to retreat, Whitman ignores questions of military strategy and even outcome; instead, he directs the readers' attention to the inner state of the person in charge of the dire situation. For Whitman, this is the key moment of the Revolution, and it is one that gives a sense of immediacy in these passages.

In his published and unpublished writings, Whitman preferred to think of Washington in his role as general, not president. Yet in his role as a military leader, the focus is on actions that are more in character with a friend or father figure than warrior. Whatever Washington accomplished as president or as a private citizen, in Whitman's mind his most important achievement was his reaction to defeat at the Battle of Brooklyn. As many scholars have noted, Whitman had contradictory views on the office of the presidency and seemed simultaneously attracted and repulsed by differing aspects of the institution.<sup>25</sup> Though much can be said for Whitman's aversion to and admiration of the office of the presidency, it seems that his nearly exclusive focus on Washington as a general in his writing is not a function of any aversion to the office itself. In fact, the "Brooklyniana" manuscripts suggest that Whitman

was planning a poem and possibly a prose work that followed Washington as he returned to Brooklyn as President of the United States. The piece is written on one scrap of paper with ink, but the title “Washington in Brooklyn” is added in pencil. It appears that Whitman is taking page numbers from Henry Onderdonk, Jr.’s *Documents and Letters Intending to Illustrate the Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County, N.Y.* (1846). The two halves of the page are separated by a line, and the top half includes fragmented notes while the second half contains both notes and what appears to be the beginnings of a poem (the word “Poem” is written in pencil at the bottom):

Washington in Brooklyn  
—after the Fulton Ferry night

—  
Washington returned again  
at the conclusion of  
the war—see p.202-3  
2<sup>d</sup> vol. Onderdonk

And then still again  
    When he was President  
    see p. 264 2<sup>d</sup> vol.  
    (last page of all)

(Poem

The first two lines underneath the line on the page, “And then still again / When he was President,” are particularly intriguing in that they incorporate language and use space on the page in a way that could have made them a third stanza to the Washington sequences in “The Sleepers.” The fact that Whitman returned to the idea of writing about Washington’s return to Brooklyn as President is significant. While Whitman did not often write about or comment upon Washington’s presidency, in a rare moment in which he does consider Washington as president, he does so with Brooklyn’s battleground as the setting.

What appears to catch Whitman’s imagination here is Washington as president revisiting the scene of defeat and despair. Carol Zapata Whelan connects Whitman’s depictions of Washington with classical Greek ideals of heroism, stating that for Whitman, “Defeat precedes victory; grief and tears show in the Homeric American legend.”<sup>26</sup> By depicting Washington as every bit as vulnerable as one of his soldiers, he elevates the general’s status: “This Washington is one of Whitman’s ‘divine average’; the common man shows through the hero, just as the hero has shown through the common man in the anonymous giant” (Zapata Whelan, 34). As the body of *Leaves of Grass* makes apparent,

such paradoxes are appealing to Whitman. Though he seems to have a reverence for the Revolutionary War hero, he also chooses to emphasize his weak human nature in his published and unpublished writings. By returning Washington to the scene of loss as president, Whitman highlights this contradiction and suggests that though the battle is done, its implications for Washington and the nation are not over. The past is not finished or fulfilled, but returned to and repeated.

Within the overall project of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, it is not surprising that Whitman would be interested in returning President Washington to this scene of loss. As the thematic trajectory of the poem makes clear, a democratic nation thrives on figures of loss-in-victory and victory-in-loss. In the poem that was eventually titled “Song of Myself,” Whitman focuses on scenes where the speaker is positioned as both witness and actor in both spectacular and everyday stories of tragedy and heroism. “I understand the large hearts of heroes, / The courage of present times and all times” (*PP*, 64), he writes as he introduces a description of a skipper who is delayed in saving victims of a wrecked steamship. The speaker, though at first passive, literally ingests this scene, taking it in and becoming a part of it: “All this I swallow and it tastes good . . . . I like it well, and it becomes mine, / I am the man . . . . I suffered . . . . I was there” (*PP*, 64). Like Washington at the Battle of Brooklyn, the speaker begins as a passive observer. As the general watches his troops die on the battlefield, so the speaker is witness to multiple heroic acts and tragedies before he literally inserts himself in the scenes, becoming the actor in the scene itself. In these passages of “Song of Myself,” the speaker becomes both the bullet and the flesh it strikes, the slave, the trapped fireman, the corpse. These imaginative embodiments also traverse historical time and space and often focus on scenes of military defeat: the speaker becomes an artilleryist during a bombardment, a soldier who is massacred with his regiment, and a seaman during a sea battle. These “fits” that carry the speaker across time and space fittingly pause to mention Washington’s legacy:

What stills the traveler come to the vault at Mount Vernon,  
What sobers the Brooklyn boy as he looks down the shores of the Wallabout and  
remembers the prison ships,  
What burnt the gums of the redcoat at Saratoga when he surrendered his brigades,  
These become mine and me every one, and they are but little,  
I become as much more as I like. (*PP*, 69-70).

These scenes of loss, both military and personal, culminate with a Christ figure’s suffering, the most recognizable story of suffering and eventual redemption for his audience:

That I could forget the mockers and insults!  
That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the bludgeons and hammers!  
That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning!  
(*PP*, 70-71)

These secular stories of redemption tie contemporary and historical events of the nation into one narrative of continuous agony, defeat, and possible redemption. The speaker is simultaneously a witness, an actor, and a recorder of known and unknown, seen and unseen tragedies. In the trajectory of this national narrative, Washington is a representative figure of the cyclical nature of victory and despair and its necessity in order to achieve vital democracy. This ideal of victory-in-loss and loss-in-victory is inherently paradoxical, but an important way in which Whitman imagines American democracy. Through these simultaneous cycles, the resolve of Washington is born, the hearts of heroes swell up with courage, and little boys humble themselves at the memory of a shared national tragedy.

Though one may trace this pattern of loss and victory in the poet's treatment of Washington throughout his published works, what the "Brooklyniana" manuscripts add to this conversation is a richer understanding of this pattern. Its emphasis on the importance of the loss at Brooklyn for the nation's history, its attempt to enter into the emotional turmoil and eventual resolve that Washington felt, and its evidence of Whitman's interest in placing President Washington back at the scene of the battle all speak to his greater democratic vision that seeks not only to make the past present, but to emphasize its recurring nature. For Whitman, Washington's role in the Battle of Brooklyn is relevant in that it is a current and recurring event, not just a piece of history.

Of course, much of Washington's role as a tragic and ultimately redemptive figure was overshadowed by Whitman's later and more intense connection with Lincoln. Harold Holzer argues that the ubiquity of prints providing visual continuity between Washington and Lincoln formed an important cultural need, "symboliz[ing] faith in democracy, respect for the past, and confidence in the future" (Holzer, 3). Holzer further claims that such representations solidified Lincoln's reputation as equal to Washington. In guiding the nation through the Civil War, Lincoln fulfills Washington's vision of Unionism, and even surpasses the Founding Father's limited vision by ridding the nation of slavery. Thus, Holzer argues, Lincoln came to be more than just Washington's heir, but a "superior cultural force, if only by an iota" by the end of the nineteenth century (Holzer, 219). The same is most likely true in Whitman's treatment of the two presidents; in establishing continuity between the two men, Lincoln eventually came to reform and to replace the distinctly eighteenth-century virtues Whitman grew up with

and admired. In the photo of Washington and Lincoln on Whitman's mantel, Lincoln becomes the heir apparent of Revolutionary principles, winning a crown of victory and a warm embrace from Washington himself. Similar to Whitman's own work, the photo brings together oppositional forces and holds them together in a coherent and reciprocal representation. Washington is no longer the stoic, aristocratic war hero, but the warm and welcoming father. Lincoln is no longer the politically polarizing, common Westerner, but apparently a handsome, swooning young man receiving the nation's blessing from its greatest figure. The historical and political realities that separate two larger-than-life figures are subverted in favor of a cohesive narrative of democracy that draws a direct line of descent from the Revolution to the Union's salvation.

Yet one can also read in this photo another narrative that would be of equal appeal to Whitman and consistent with the project of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. In this reading of the photograph, Washington and Lincoln represent continuity of national tragedy and loss. Placing the crown of victory on Lincoln's brow with one hand and embracing him with the other, the Washington of the Battle of Brooklyn welcomes Lincoln into the national narrative of defeat and eventual victory that is always tinged with a sense of loss. Here, Lincoln does not finish the work of the Revolution, but affirms and continues it, his suffering through the Civil War and untimely death after a short-lived victory that reenacts the same cyclical narrative. By focusing in his writing on scenes of Washington at his most vulnerable and conflicted, and by placing those scenes in the context of an ever-recurring event, Whitman represents his vision of democracy as borne out of the continuous playing out of cycles of conflict and redemption in order to maintain relevance and vitality. The nation, then, is continually in need of such redemptive figures. The Washington who embraces Lincoln is the same general in the tavern in "The Sleepers," embracing not only the figure of the assassinated president, but a line of countless known and unknown heroes who make up the continuing narrative of national redemption.

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## NOTES

1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (various publishers, 1906-1996), 3:134. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

2 The reproduction of the carte-de-visite accompanying this essay is available at the James W. Bollinger Digital Collection of the University of Iowa (<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/bollinger/image9.html>). Several pirated versions of Ferris's lithograph existed, and it is unclear which particular version Whitman owned.

3 Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer has traced the phenomenon of placing images of Washington and Lincoln together from its beginnings during Lincoln's 1860 campaign to the proliferation of deific imagery after his assassination; see Harold Holzer, *Washington and Lincoln Portrayed: National Icons in Popular Prints* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993).

4 "Washington's Farewell Address 1796," Available at *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp)).

5 Barry Schwartz, "Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991), 223.

6 Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 31-34.

7 Barbara J. Mitnick, "Parallel Visions: The Literary and Visual Image of George Washington," Barbara J. Mitnick, ed., *George Washington: American Symbol* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 63.

8 According to Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Whitman seems to express disfavor for the first president's personal temperament, deeming it less appropriate for the presidency than Lincoln's warmth and common manners: "Washington was more stiff and stately" (5:94). Earlier, the poet comments, "Lincoln was more likely as a Walt Whitman Horace Traubel man: Washington belonged to another period, to another social era: and Washington is too big to be trifled with. I allow him his full measure. But Lincoln? Well, we are very near Lincoln. He is like somebody that lives in our own house" (1:62). Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

9 See Walt Whitman, *The Journalism, 1834-1846* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 1:141-142. In a March 20, 1842, *Sunday Times* article, Whitman writes that during the same period of the Battle of Brooklyn, General Washington became enraged after troops stationed to defend Kipp's Bay began abandoning their posts upon a British ship's landing: "On this occasion—and it is said to have been, with one exception, the only time he was heard to use profane language during the revolution—the commander-in-chief pulled his chapeau from his head, cast it upon the ground, called the retreated soldiers d----d scoundrels and cowards, and at the same time pulled a pistol from his holsters, and threatened to shoot the first man that passed by him" (1:142). Oddly, Whitman ends the tale of Washington's fit of rage with an endorsement for the scenery: "To any of our pedestrian readers who may feel inclined to visit this classical ground of the island of Manhattan, we can promise them a pleasant walk" (1:142).

10 The "Brooklyniana" manuscripts are housed in The Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, 1839-1919, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The manuscript transcriptions provided are my own, taken from digital photographs of the manuscripts provided by the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

11 In the opening chapter of *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Jerome Loving details the poet's life during the time he wrote the "Brooklyniana" series for the *Brooklyn Standard*. A month before the first article appeared, Whitman's younger brother, George Washington Whitman, enlisted in the New York State Militia. Though it may seem odd that Whitman spent the early period of the Civil War writing (largely unoriginal) historical pieces about Brooklyn, Loving points out that Whitman was not yet touched by the war's harsh realities and only became immersed in it once his brother and the Union were clearly threatened. If the pieces in the "Brooklyniana" manuscript file are related to or contemporaneous

with the journalism pieces published under the same title, their recurring emphasis on George Washington and the Battle of Brooklyn may suggest ways in which Whitman was obliquely responding to the Civil War.

12 These notes appear to be drawn directly from Benjamin F. Thompson's *The History of Long Island* (1843 edition) a book that Whitman owned. The relevant parts of Thompson's volume read:

*Seawan* or *seawant* was also the name of Indian shell money, of which there were two kinds as above mentioned—*wompam*, white; and *Suckanhock*, (from sucki) black. The white was made frequently from the stem or stock of the *meteahock* or *periwinkle*, while the black was manufactured from the shell of the *quahaug* (*venus mercenaria*) or large round clam. The Indians broke off about half an inch from the inside (which was of a purple color) and converted it into beads. Before the introduction of awls and thread, the shells were bored through with sharp stones, and strung upon the sinews of small beasts, and when interwoven of a hand's breadth, more or less, were called a belt of seawan or wompum.

A black, bead, the size of a straw, about; one third of an inch long, bored longitudinally and well polished, was the gold of the Indians, and was always esteemed of twice the value of the white. Either species, however, was considered by them of much more value than any European coin. An Indian chief, to whom the value of a rix-dollar was explained by the first clergyman of Ren- selaerwyck, laughed exceedingly to think the Dutch should set so high a price upon a piece of iron, as he termed it. Three beads of black and six of white were equivalent, among-the English, to a penny, and among the Dutch, to a stuyver. But with the latter, the equivalent number sometimes varied from three and six, to four and eight. One of Governor Minit's successors fixed, by placard, the price of the "good splendid seawan of Manhattan" at four for a stuyver. A string of this money, a fathom long, varied in price from five shillings among the New Englanders, (after the Dutch gave them a knowledge of it,) to four guilders, (81.66J,) among the Dutch. The process of trade was this: the Dutch and English sold for seawan, their knives, combs, scissors, needles, awls, looking-glasses, hatchets, hoes, guns, black cloth, and other articles of Indian traffic; and with the seawan, bought the furs, corn, and venison of the Indians upon the seaboard ; who also, with their shell money, bought the like articles from Indians residing in the interior of the country. Thus, by this species of circulating medium, a brisk commerce was carried on, not only between the white people and the Indians, but between different tribes of the latter. For the seawan was not only used as money, but to ornament their persons. It answered to distinguish the rich from the poor, the proud from the humble. It was also the tribute paid by the vanquished to those (the Five Nations for instance) who exacted contribution. (85-87)

The text of the manuscript reads:

Here the aboriginal money circulated,— strings of [illegible]-small polished shells, some white, some black [illegible]-strung on the sinews of small animals; the money called Seawan, or Seawant.—(Circulated all through the Dutch and early English gov administrations)—The early traders sold to the aborigines knives, combs, scissors, needles, awls, looking=glasses, hatchets, hoes, guns, black and red

cloth, and received pay in Seawant, with that he[?] furs, maize, venison, &c.—

The Seawant was also used—a disposed on the red man's person, as an ornament A belt of it [illegible]—called wampum and bore

The text of the “Brooklyniana” article No. 4 reads:

The process of trade between the Indians and the settlers here and in New York was as follows: the Dutch and English sold to the Indians hatchets, hoes, combs, scissors, guns, black and red cloth, &c., and received the seawan shells, in strings or belts, for pay; and then in return bought furs, corn, venison, &c., and paid in seawan. The Indians laughed at the idea of gold or silver money and would not touch either. The seawan was also strung upon the persons of the savages, for ornament. It was the tribute paid by the Indians here, when conquered by the Six Nations, the Mohawks, &c., with whom the aborigines of Kings County had frequent wars.

These points are worth putting on record, when we remember that this Island, and especially this end of it, surpassed all the continent in the permanent manufacture of this curious article.

See Walt Whitman, *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921), 2:235.

13 Many pages of the manuscript are written in a timeline format that emphasizes dates, suggesting that Whitman was taking notes directly from a source. The manuscript also appears to refer directly to passages in Henry Onderdonk Jr.'s *Documents and Letters Intending to Illustrate the Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County, N.Y.* (1846) and, on a separate page, mentions incorporating information from Richard Hildreth's *The History of the United States of America* (most likely Volume 1, published in 1849), along with information on Brooklyn's colonization.

14 The quotation from the Brooklyn *Daily Standard* is taken directly from transcriptions of the articles provided by the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

15 Later pages of the manuscript file, written in a much neater and less revised script on a different type of paper, appear to echo “The Centenarian's Story,” and “The Sleepers,” or, as it could also be said, the poems echo the manuscript.

16 Quotations from the 1855 version of “The Sleepers” are taken from Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 112. Hereafter, *PP*.

17 George B. Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 4-5.

18 See Alan Trachtenberg, “Whitman at Night: ‘The Sleepers’ in 1855” in Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, eds., *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 124-138; and Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 121.

19 Whitman describes defeated soldiers returning from Bull Run as “true braves” (*PP*, 733); later, he titles a section about a heroic act by a Southern soldier “A Secesh Brave” (*PP*, 744).

20 Accounts from varied biographers such as Weems, John Marshall, and Washington Irving all corroborate that the farewell at the tavern took place with officers only. In Weems's account, Washington says farewell to the lower-ranking troops in a formal ceremony full of pomp and military exercises. In Irving's account, which draws heavily on Marshall's previous work, the general meets only with his officers at the tavern. Also, Irving portrays Washington's final days as commander of the forces as fraught with tension toward the lower-ranking soldiers due to their unprofessional and unruly behavior.

21 Joyce Kornblatt, "Whitman's Vision of the Past in 'The Sleepers,'" *Walt Whitman Review* 16 (1970), 86-89.

22 David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 15.

23 Stephen John Mack, *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 22.

24 The transcriptions of the "Brooklyniana" manuscripts are my own, and I have attempted to present them as accurately as possible. The symbol "^^" indicates that Whitman used a caret to add the word or phrase; a question mark indicates that I am unsure of a particular word; superscript indicates passages that were written physically above one line of writing (in other words, between two already established lines of writing) in the manuscript. Material is marked "[illegible]" when I could not determine even a close approximation of the original word. All words that were crossed out in the manuscript are crossed out in my transcriptions, and wherever possible, I have alerted the reader to important physical aspects of the layout of the page and the various writing utensils used.

25 For a discussion of Whitman's conflicting views toward the Presidency, see Vivian Pollak "Whitman Unperturbed: The Civil War and After," in Ed Folsom, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 30-47. Also see Nathan Faries's article "Walt Whitman and the Presidency," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22 (Spring 2005), 157-173.

26 Carol Zapata Whelan, "'Do I Contradict Myself?': Progression through Contraries in Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10 (Summer 1992), 34.