



Whitman's Native Futurism: Frontier Erotics in the 1860 Leaves of Grass

Benjamin Meiners
Washington University in St. Louis

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Recommended Citation

Meiners, Benjamin. "Whitman's Native Futurism: Frontier Erotics in the 1860 Leaves of Grass." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (2018), 245-266. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2289>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

WHITMAN'S NATIVE FUTURISM: FRONTIER EROTICS IN THE 1860 *LEAVES OF GRASS*

BENJAMIN MEINERS



FROM JANUARY 1 TO JUNE 30, 1865, Walt Whitman held a post as a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. During this six-month stint, besides the required bureaucratic tasks, Whitman encountered a number of delegations of indigenous peoples, who would often arrive there for the negotiation of land treaties. He was also making marks and marginalia for future revisions of a book that would, in the twentieth century, come to dominate discussions of gender and sexuality in Whitman's oeuvre: the third, 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the first edition of *Leaves* to include the now-immortalized "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam" poem-clusters.¹ At the same time that he was meeting indigenous delegates (and, reportedly, visiting some of them in their hotel rooms to speak with them with the help of an interpreter), Whitman was revising the edition of *Leaves* that not only makes the sexual element of his democratic-poetic project hyper-explicit, but places it at the very forefront of that project.² In moods ranging from rhapsodic to morose, Whitman's expansive poetic "I" moves from lover to lover, from gender to gender, from the Atlantic coast and its metropolitan port cities to the Pacific. In the 1876 *Two Rivulets*, Whitman would later write of the "Calamus" cluster specifically: "Important as they are in my purpose as emotional expressions for humanity, the special meaning of the 'Calamus' cluster of *Leaves of Grass* (and more or less running through that book, and cropping out in 'Drum-Taps,') mainly resides in its political significance."³

It took a great deal of time for Whitman critics not only to take this pronouncement seriously, but to investigate its full import. Since 1979, gay, queer, and feminist critics have offered powerful interpretations of "the special meaning" of the "Calamus" cluster. That year marked the appearance of Robert K. Martin's highly influential work, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, which offered the

first sustained account of the homoeroticism in Whitman's poetry.⁴ In Martin's radical reframing of Whitman's sexual-poetic politics, he argues that "Whitman's ideal society requires socialism, democracy, and homosexuality" (21). While this position has been both nuanced and critiqued, his identification of the intertwining of the sexual and the political in Whitman's work has (rightly) become commonplace. So, too, has the connection between sexuality and radical egalitarianism. Since Martin, critics such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Byrne Fone, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, Alan Helms, Michael Moon, Michael Warner, Vivian Pollak, and Betsy Erkkila have countered a long-standing tendency in Whitman criticism that has both intentionally and unintentionally evaded, obscured, or erased the intimate entanglement of the (homo)erotic and the political that *Leaves of Grass* poetically performs.⁵ Following this counter-tradition, contemporary Whitman criticism seems to have reached a consensus that, as Michael Warner succinctly puts it, "Whitman wants to make sex public" (40).

While I am indebted to this relatively recent queer and feminist counter-tradition of Whitman criticism, I want to temper and critique a line of thought that runs through it, one that sustains its own divisions: by emphasizing the "radical" and "democratic" nature of Whitman's sexual-political-poetic project, critics have tended to de-emphasize its spatiality, focusing instead on his temporal (that is, his future-oriented), progressivist social vision. These critics have focused on his desires for what America will or might or could be: an America that he believed erotic intimacies between men might engender. But, the intimate entanglement between Whitman's "radical" and "democratic" sexual politics and his nationalist, imperialist vision of United States expansion has remained overlooked. Whitman's third edition takes as its primary investment the "reproductive futurism" of the United States, a concept now famous in American academic queer theory by Lee Edelman's important if highly contested work, *No Future*.⁶ While Edelman attaches reproductive futurity to the heteronormative logics of political investments in the future (the Child), I recast Edelman's concept in terms of Whitman's "native futurism." This future not only includes but demands the sexually errant, the perverse, the "queer." But, while Whitman's poetry often disrupts the

heteronormative, biopolitical imperatives of the United States nation-state, that disruption nonetheless depends upon an imperialist, expansionist vision. What America will or might or could be depended on an expansionist vision of both poetic self and nation and the “open space” of an imagined frontier. This essay thus traces the frontier erotics of one of Whitman’s earliest efforts to describe the possibilities of queer futurity in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.⁷ When we theorize Whitman’s “radical” sexual politics and forgo its relation to a national/personal expansionist vision, Whitman critics run the risk of naturalizing settler colonialism in the nineteenth century—as well as in the present. Recently, Chandan Reddy has cautioned against a queer theory in which “sexuality names the normative frames that organize our disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiries into our past,” forgoing the ways in which such frames can reify, skirt, or obscure racist thought.⁸ With this in mind, it is vital for Whitman criticism to interrogate those frames and ask how Whitman’s radical sexual vision of democracy in many ways depended upon violence—obscured at times as it may be—against indigenous peoples in the U.S.⁹

I investigate Whitman’s queer frontier erotics—imagined in terms of expansion, fluidity, and abundant futurity—through an analysis of one of the first sustained poetic treatments of male-male intimacy written in the nineteenth-century U.S. I began this essay (and will end it) with Whitman’s involvement in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in order to draw an explicit connection to Whitman’s erotic poetry and his involvement with an agency that played a pivotal role in shaping U.S. government policy relations between the State and indigenous peoples and the mapping of national space. While the “frontier” has often been associated with masculinist and heteronormative visions of national space, reading the “frontier” erotics of Whitman’s third edition of *Leaves of Grass* reveals the complex historical interconnections between queer sexualities and national expansion in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century United States.

As I attend to Whitman’s many explicit gestures toward national/self-expansion in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, I also analyze more quotidian moments of intimate belonging, dissecting the ways in which the erotics of Whitman’s “I”—expansive, limitless, ever-

fluid—imaginatively depend upon the logics of settler colonialism.¹⁰ Rather than concentrate on poems that explicitly celebrate U.S. expansionism (like, for example, “O Pioneers!” first published in the 1865 poetry collection entitled *Drum-Taps*), I focus on Whitman’s erotic poetry because it reveals the expansionist implications of the “queer” forms of intimacy he hoped to engender.¹¹

“Proto-Leaf”: *Inseminating Westward*

It is not uncommon for literary critics to note the marked differences between Whitman’s 1860 edition of *Leaves* and the previous two, in content and in form. These critics take their cue from Whitman himself, who advertised it in these very terms. Months before its publication, Whitman outlined his ambitions for the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in an anonymous article published in the *Saturday Press*, declaring both its difference from and superiority to the first two editions:

Those former issues, published by the author himself in little pittance-editions, on trial, have just dropped the book enough to ripple the inner first-circles of literary agitation, in immediate contact with it. The outer, vast, extending, and ever-wider-extending circles of the general supply, perusal, and discussion of such a work, have still to come. The market needs to-day to be supplied—the great West especially—with copious thousands of copies.

Indeed, LEAVES OF GRASS has not yet been really published at all.¹²

In articulating a vision of readership in terms of “outer, vast, extending, and ever-wider-extending circles,” Whitman imagines an expanding social body—one that depends upon “the great West especially.” This was more than a mere advertising ploy. In a manuscript dated June 1857, he calls this project upon which he was embarking “The Great Construction of the New Bible.”¹³ Indeed, the edition has the very look of the popular King James Bibles widely available at the time.¹⁴ And his portrait inside, a more conventional image of the “Poet,” marks a shift from the sexy, cocky, full-bodied Whitman of the first edition. One might argue that this shift in self-presentation was a conscious act on Whitman’s part to downplay the charged eroticism of this new

edition, to promote his own legitimacy as a poet to be taken seriously. However, this would too readily dichotomize the sexual and the religious, as Whitman represents them. It also obscures the highly “Adamic” shift of that persona in the third edition: the simultaneously religious, political, and sexual significance to which I will attend below.

If Whitman’s ambitions were biblical, they were also highly national. This Bible would, he hoped, bind a fragmented nation. Publishing the third edition on the cusp of the Civil War, Whitman sought a means by which he might poetically unify a divided country: this was to be the Great Bible to which all citizens might adhere, thus engendering a single body politic. As his anonymous review makes clear, the strength and sustainment of that body politic prioritizes neither “North” nor “South,” but the “West.” Whitman’s expansionist longing for an “outer, vast, extending, and ever-wider-extending” readership was not a mere literary or market ambition. He sought, as Peter Coviello has argued, “a visionary nationalism, structured around the promise of anonymous intimacies.”¹⁵ His aim to extend that literary network to the “great West” reveals the import of unbounded space to the survival of the anonymously intimate, unified nation for which he longed. It also reveals the ways in which his “expansive,” future-oriented poetic vision (“still to come”) had a physical-spatial reality, one of expansion to the “great West.”

One important and early noticeable difference is its opening poem, entitled “Proto-Leaf,” which poetically, aesthetically, and erotically frames how the remainder of the third edition might be read. While the title of this new initial poem might simply seem to indicate its position as the first poem in the edition, alternative definitions of the prefix “proto” also suggest the biological and the sexual—the reproductive—aims of the poem: “at an early stage of development, primitive, incipient, potential.”¹⁶ And while this title might seem to emphasize the temporal dimension of Whitman’s sexual-political project, it is in this poem that he continues to elaborate the unique potential of the U.S. landscape and its direct effect upon its art, its social character, and its place on the world stage. If in the first edition Whitman announced himself “Walt Whitman, an American, one of

the roughs, a kosmos” who would dialectically and democratically absorb his national readership, in the third edition he takes on the position of a guide, a leader, shepherding his readers into a westward future.¹⁷

The logics that frame that guidance are the logics of displacement. To explain, in Whitman’s advocacy of what Emerson had called “an original relation to the universe,”¹⁸ he appropriates—as he had done in previous editions—tropes associated with indigenous peoples, announcing himself at the edition’s beginning as “Fresh, free, savage.”¹⁹ It is through these tropes that he is able to imagine an unencumbered “I”: free from the state and free from normative, hierarchized modes of belonging. But that unencumbered self is tethered to and depends upon the expansiveness of land.

In the poem’s first stanza, in a catalogue typical of his aesthetic, Whitman sweeps across the soil; and while some have noted the continuous present tense in this poetic practice, here we see a definitively *future*-oriented cataloguing: he begins as a “Boy of the Mannahatta” then presents alternative places from which he might come: “Or raised inland, or of the south savannas, / Or full-breath’d on Californian air, or Texan or Cuban air, / Tallying, vocalizing all—resounding Niagara—resounding Missouri” (5); and his catalogue continues until, by the stanza’s end, the multivalent boy-figure becomes a single “I”: “Solitary, singing in the west, I strike up for a new world” (6).²⁰ These alternatives—made accumulative by the repetition of “or”—allow this (emphatically male) child-figure not only to encompass vast expanses of space but to tally them, to *vocalize* or *name* them. This vocalization, this naming speaks to an act of claimed ownership.²¹ Here, we should not underestimate the colonialist metaphor linking the “west” with the “new world.” If Whitman’s “I” attempts to lead his readers forward in time, he also attempts to lead them forward in space, expanding outward to the north and the south (he lists Canada, Cuba, and Mexico as sites toward which he sounds his chants) but especially to the west (5-7).²²

Whitman later highlights the indicatively reproductive aspect of his westward advance. In the thirteenth stanza of “Proto-Leaf,” he writes, “Take my leaves, America! / Make welcome for them everywhere,

for they are your own offspring; / Surround them, East and West! for they would surround you, / And you precedents! connect lovingly with them, for they connect lovingly with you” (8). These lines, of course, are reproductive, with references to “offspring” and “precedents”; however, they invite an understanding of reproductivity that is not limited to (though it may include) heterosexuality or traditional marriage.²³ The distinctions between male and female, active and passive, are blurred by a receptivity that is simultaneously command and plea to a feminized yet agential “America.” And while “leaves” is of course a pun on the book’s title and the physicality of its pages, it is also seminal. But who has inseminated whom? Has Whitman inseminated the reader? Or by reading has the reader inseminated the page, and thus Whitman? The queer erotic potential of reading that Whitman imagines here then takes on a spatial component: he (rather vaguely) commands his reader to make space for his “leaves” but also to “surround them.” This is not a mere metaphor for parental nurturing but also suggests containment and perhaps even the preservation of sameness.

As the poem continues, and Whitman’s “I” continues to expand, cataloguing and encompassing peoples and places from Maine to California, he pauses. In this pause is his first explicit reference to indigenous peoples. The poem’s “I” stops his forward march in time and space to account for them, to take stock of them, to mark their place in national time:²⁴

On my way a moment I pause,
 Here for you! And here for America!
 Still the Present I raise aloft—Still the Future of The States I harbinger, glad
 and sublime,
 And for the Past I pronounce what the air holds of the red aborigines.

The red aborigines!
 Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals
 in the woods, syllabled to us for names,
 Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kaqueta,
 Oronoco.
 Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla,
 Leaving such to The States, they melt, they depart, charging the water and the
 land with names. (20)

Whitman's pause here suggests a delay, a deferral of futurity. He addresses a "you," the reader, and syntactically parallels that "you" alongside "America." He gives primacy to the "Present" and, in a fashion typical of Whitman's persona since his 1855 preface, "harbinger[s]" the "Future." The "Future" here takes on a particularly imperialistic tone. Even as the 1855 Preface employed the language of American exceptionalism in national and literary terms under the rubric of "race" ("The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races," he writes there [*Poetry and Prose* 6-7]), it is far less clear where indigenous peoples fit into his grandiose nation-as-world vision. In "Proto-Leaf," however, this issue is thrown into sharp relief: the "red aborigines" are not only distinguished from Whitman's literary audience (they are distinct from the "you" addressee) but are consigned to the "Past" that Whitman's "I" both claims and abandons. He claims indigenous languages for their incorporation into English in order to establish a unique "American" language, while the peoples themselves "melt" and "depart," with seeming inevitability.²⁵ Immediately following this stanza, Whitman's "I" announces "A world primal again—Vistas of glory, incessant and branching, / A new race, dominating previous ones, and grander far" (20). Having passed, temporally *because* spatially, the "red aborigines" who have "melted" and "departed," Whitman envisions new "vistas": new future possibilities on the western landscape in which his readers, carrying his vision, are "incessant and branching"—in other words, reproducing. Because of the proximity of these lines from those explicitly representing—indeed, cataloguing—indigenous tribes, "race" here cannot be understood as merely metaphorical or merely abstract nationalism. And the language of "domination" also forces us to examine the interrelations of U.S. imperialism and Whitman's "radical, democratic" vision. Who is included, who is excluded, in that political future-vision? And what are the logics of that inclusion and exclusion? While the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* may indeed offer a vision of—or a struggle toward—"vistas of glory," at whose expense does that vision depend? We turn now to "Calamus"—that cluster of poems that has most preoccupied Whitman's queer readers and critics since its publication—to further explore the stakes of Whitman's queer future that never came to be.²⁶

“Calamus”: Making the Continent Indissoluble

In the first poem of the “Calamus” cluster, Whitman invokes both a familiar and unconventional pastoral landscape, familiar in its masculinist mythologizing of man’s domination over nature, but unconventional in its queer attachments and its emphasis on sociality over individualism:

In paths untrodden,
 In the growth by the margins of pond-waters,
 Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
 From all the standards hitherto published—from the pleasures, profits, conformities,
 Which too long I was offering to feed to my Soul;
 ...
 Here, by myself, away from the clank of the world,
 Tallying and talked to here by tongues aromatic,
 No longer abashed—for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare
 elsewhere,
 Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest. (341)

Desire does not disintegrate the “I” into elemental Nature; it allows him to “escape” from “civilization”—“from the pleasures, profits, conformities” that have left his “Soul” malnourished. The poem seems to beg for an (albeit anachronistic) identitarian gay male reading: in such a reading, Whitman, having escaped from the heteronormative polis, imagines a space wherein men might live “the life that does not exhibit itself”; as he writes later in the poem, “To tell the secret of my nights and days” (342). But the reason it seems to beg for such a reading is precisely because of the stability of the “I” in this poem and in others in the “Calamus” sequence. That stability, I suggest, derives from Whitman’s imagined sovereignty—the “givenness” of both a self and the availability of land on which that self might roam.

Robert K. Martin’s analysis of these opening lines is worth quoting in full, because it highlights the possible pitfalls of such readings:

This figure introduces a spatial element to the contrast already established between two points in time: the new space, like the new time, announces Whitman’s conversion. The new man is to inhabit a new world. The “untrodden” paths represent Whitman not only as the pioneer but also the “first man,” as Adam. Whitman’s dramatization of his conversion demands that we see himself

as radically new, going alone into virgin land, whatever his knowledge of other authors. While Whitman makes use of the pioneer and explorer metaphor, it is significant that he does not situate himself in a western landscape. In Whitman space is not a territory to be conquered (as is characteristic of male heterosexual literature) but a place “by the margins” to be explored, a “secluded spot” which is not a territory beyond but alongside. Instead of an extension in length, as in the metaphor of conquest, there is a broadening, an extension in width to include what was once seen as “marginal.” (54)

The “conversion” about which Martin writes is an avowedly secular one, a kind of “coming out” in temporal terms that the poem then maps out in spatial ones. Space in this poem, as Martin would have it, becomes a temporalized metaphor, and as such begins to take on a far more democratic approach to land (gendered as female) than standard masculinist tropes of land conquest. But this temporalizing and metaphorizing of space too hastily rejects the possibility that the politics of the Adamic “pioneer” figure and the desire for “gay” space might in fact be working in tandem. Martin argues that “it is significant that he does not situate himself in a western landscape,” and yet the “Calamus” cluster is littered not only with references to the “West,” but also to western expansion: of self, of nation, of progeny. Whitman’s passage, “the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest,” highlights the reproductive potential Whitman saw in male adhesive love²⁷ on the “frontier.”²⁸ Whitman’s sovereign “I” contains not only life—in the seminal metaphor that we also see in “Enfans d’Adam” that is present as well in “Calamus”—but “all the rest”: not only new life but the land that makes that possible, land that is imagined as empty, available, “untrodden.”

In the fifth poem of the “Calamus” cluster, later entitled “O Democracy!,” Whitman makes the reproductivity of adhesiveness most explicit. Writing in the future tense, his Adamic persona prophetically announces the future America that his sexual-political poetry will bring forth:

There shall from me be a new friendship—It shall be called after my name,
It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of place,
It shall twist and intertwist them through and around each other—Compact
they shall be, showing new signs,
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. (349)

For Whitman, it is only through adhesiveness—and his adhesive poetics—that “The States” might be “Compact.” This “new friendship,” which “circulate[s],” “twist[s] and intertwist[s],” binds bodies and “States” in an almost orgiastic sense; if in “Calamus” 18 (later entitled “City of Orgies”), he celebrates a city of “Lovers, continual lovers,” this represents to him a small-scale form of his primary desire: an orgiastic *nation*. If “Those who love each other shall be invincible,” so too will America be “completely victorious.” In other words, for Whitman, the State *depends* upon individual lovers, and empire depends upon quotidian eros. If, according to the Foucauldian model of bio-power, the State’s investment in the management and maintenance of life is fundamentally a hetero-reproductive one, Whitman’s investment in a future inaugurated by “a new friendship” highlights the ways in which queer modes of belonging may not necessarily be antithetical to the State’s biopolitical imperatives—the production of a coherent, healthy, recognizable, yet expansive body politic:²⁹

I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever yet shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and
along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other’s necks. (351)

The language of race and of land here speak to the political stakes of Whitman’s reproductive-poetic project. Making not only the State but the *continent* “indissoluble,” the sense of land in “Calamus” is not merely temporal or metaphorical (though they are indeed those as well). Expansive land is absolutely necessary for the expansive self, who expands by way of his progeny, “the most splendid race.” Again, in a quasi-seminal metaphor, Whitman proclaims, “I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America,” and if this metaphor is seminal, it also upends the masculinist pioneer trope of (hetero)sexual conquest in intent but finally upholds it in effect. In

the landedness of companionship as Whitman presents it exists the perceived self-evidence of the (future) State's sovereignty over land, as well as the perceived absence of Native Americans on that land. Vivian Pollak argues of the "Calamus" cluster: "Here race as a category of social analysis is subsumed by gender and perverse sexual desire. Implicitly, we read 'Calamus' as the story of unconventional *white men*."³⁰ If gender and sexuality are often fluid, anti-hierarchical, and "democratic," as Pollak suggests, the racialized logics that undergird that vision compel us to re-examine our frameworks for what constitutes the radical sexual citizenship Whitman attempted to poetically (re)produce in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's utopic frontier is not, I contend, racially homogenous by accident nor lack of imagination. When in poem 25 of the "Calamus" sequence, prairie-grass divides for Whitman and his progeny and his lovers, can we merely read this as metaphorical or as temporal? When in poem 30, Whitman offers "A promise and gift to California" "to teach robust American love," and writes, "For These States tend inland, and toward the Western Sea—and I will also," is this merely a gesture toward sexual-democratic communalism (371)? In Whitman, *temporal* expansion into the future for which he calls depends upon the *spatial* expansion of "Americans" for whom he longed to follow him.

In the last poem of the "Calamus" cluster, Whitman explicitly imagines such a future. Writing to a future reader, he enjoins his present and theirs in a palpable yet fraught erotic union:

Full of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible,
 I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of The States,
 To one a century hence, or any number of centuries hence,
 To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

When you read these, I, that was visible, am become invisible;
 Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me,
 Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become your lover;
 Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I am now with you. (378)

Whitman projects into the future an ideal reader who not only seeks him but realizes his poems, realizing them in the sense of both discovery and making real: this reader, in their ideal form, is the product of

Whitman's sexual-political project having come to full fruition, a reader who can perceive the intimacy and eroticism of Whitman's poetics and politics. Near the end of his life, Whitman would call this ideal reader (who is also an ideal American citizen, who is also an ideal lover), a "native American." But as Ed Folsom has noted, "Whitman . . . would never grant the Indians the word 'natives.' That was a word he reserved for what 'real' Americans would come to be when they fully and democratically absorbed the world around them." Folsom goes on to explain, "Whitman sought to associate the quality of being native American with the qualities of absorption and democratic inclusiveness; in this sense, Indians could at best become a part of the native Americans, but were themselves pre-Americans, native to the land but not native to the country that in Whitman's view brought that land to life."³¹ But even as indigenous peoples could at best become a part of the native Americans, Whitman's "native American" project depended upon the further colonization of land. And similarly, I would add, they are nonetheless written out of Whitman's queer nationalist project. He positions them firmly within the realm of the past, as well as he imagines land as lifeless before expansion. Whitman's reproductive future—by so many accounts "democratic," "radical," and "queer"—elides the lives of those whose citizenship is precarious within the U.S. nation-state, and operates within the logics of displacement.

Whitman's Native Futurism

In 1871, Whitman published *Democratic Vistas*, a long prose work of political philosophy in which he developed and intermingled theories of democracy, poetry, and sexuality that would return to the themes of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* and would continue to shape his literary efforts for the rest of his life. In *Vistas* we find the following passage in the form of a footnote:

It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my

inferences: but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown—not only giving tone to individual character, and making it unprecedentedly emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the deepest relations to general politics. I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself. (*Poetry and Prose* 1005-1006)

Ten years later, Whitman's dreams for the future had, as yet, receded unrealized. There is continuity with the third edition of *Leaves* evident here: the intermingling of the erotic and the political, the fervent hope for that ambiguous-and-yet-clear-as-day signifier, comradeship, and the utopic future imagined in reproductive terms. There is also change: he de-couples amativeness and adhesiveness and prioritizes the latter, suggesting shifting conceptions of sexual object-choice into the more (supposedly) stable, binaristic terms of "homo-" and "hetero-." So, too, does the passage suggest the givenness of American space as a knowable, albeit abstract, entity, with a discernible and singular character with its unique "worldly interests."

Juxtapose these theories with another passage written in 1888, near the end of his life. Whitman's *November Boughs*, a collection of poetry and prose, looks back fondly on the time he spent at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He recounts:

Along this time there came to see their Great Father an unusual number of aboriginal visitors, delegations for treaties, settlement of lands, &c. . . . the most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce, (the survival of the fittest, no doubt—all the frailer samples dropt, sorted out by death)—as if to show how the earth and woods, the attrition of storms and elements, and the exigencies of life at first hand, can train and fashion men, indeed chiefs, in heroic massiveness, imperturbability, muscle, and that last and highest beauty consisting of strength—the full exploitation and fruition of a human identity, not from the culmination—points of "culture" and artificial civilization, but tallying our race, as it were, with giant, vital, gnarl'd, enduring trees, or monoliths of separate hardest rocks, and humanity holding its own with the best of the said trees or rocks, and outdoing them. (1194-1195)

In this flowing passage, Whitman retrospectively looks upon these

“aboriginal visitors” with admiration—an admiration that, as clause builds upon clause, suggests an “adhesive” quality. Admiring their “heroic massiveness, imperturbability, muscle, and that last and highest beauty consisting of strength—the full exploitation and fruition of human identity,” Whitman’s gaze not only begins to take on an erotic charge; he describes them in terms remarkably similar to the ideal companions of the “Enfans d’Adam” and “Calamus” sequences: “the most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce.” But the passages that frame that gaze indicate the difference between the men here and the men and women and erotically charged land of those poems. His parenthetical, “(the survival of the fittest, no doubt—all the frailer samples dropt, sorted out by death),” draws on the discourse of Spencerian social evolution and circumscribes indigenous peoples—with the exception of those “most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce”—to the site of inevitable decline and death; indeed, evolution is the agential figure here who “sorts out” the “frailer samples” rather than the realities of settler colonialism, the conquest of land, and biopolitical imperialism.³² At the end of this passage, Whitman attributes the “full exploitation and fruition of a human identity” of these men to their distinction from Anglo-European culture. Here his language returns to the geological: “tallying our race, as it were, with giant, vital, gnarl’d, enduring trees, or monoliths of separate hardest rocks, and humanity holding its own with the best of the said trees or rocks, and outdoing them.” As he assumes the global dominion of “humanity” (“our race”), and indeed notes that his “aboriginal visitors” provide proof to support that dominion, that idea of superiority legitimates the imperialist project of land acquisition—and thus, the theft of land from indigenous peoples, despite their nominal inclusion here in “our race.”

Between the time in which Whitman published the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* and his death in 1892, the United States’ expansionist policies—formal and informal—led to “the countless battles and massacres of the 1860s and 1870s (when names like Birch Coulee, Canyon de Chelly, Rosebud, and Warbonnet Creek entered the American common vocabulary), culminating in the Wounded Knee massacre at the end of 1890” (Folsom 56). Alongside these battles and massacres followed shifting understandings of what constituted U.S.

national space. If these were political battles and massacres, these were also biopolitical ones. What Achille Mbembe writes of the “necropolitics” of the colony in a colonial state also describes the necropolitics of nineteenth-century American contact zones: they “are zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other. As such, [they] are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization.’”³³ The naturalization of this necropolitical space, whether “ignored or appears necessary or complete,” defines the settler colonialism that undergirds Whitman’s “queer” sexual-political project.³⁴

In *November Boughs*, the logics of settler colonialism—the naturalized “modernity” dependent upon national expansion—inform Whitman’s forward-looking proclamation: “As for native American individuality, though certain to come . . . it has not yet appear’d” (*Poetry and Prose* 667). For Whitman, the “native American” exists in the future. And this is a future that Whitman’s poetic persona, his famous all-encompassing “I,” attempts to engender from the outset of his poetic career. In the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he calls for a poet who “places himself where the future becomes present”; because of him, “a new order shall arise.”³⁵ Whitman calls this “new order” in the “Calamus” sequence “the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon” (351). As is clear in the “Calamus” and “Enfans d’Adam” poetry sequences, Whitman believed that sex, both as a reproductive and a social or communal act, was imperative in the creation of that “race of races,” that “new order,” that “native American individuality.” But if Whitman held fast to the belief that in America lay the promise of new modes of erotic citizenship, this promise depended on the logics of indigenous displacement; the conceptualization of land-as-tabula rasa on which he could project a better, “queerer” national union; and the imaginary utopic not-yet of the United States that consigned indigenous peoples to a distant past.

Washington University in St. Louis
 b.meiners@wustl.edu

NOTES

1 At the time that he was fired from his post, the Secretary of the Interior, William T. Otto, reported to Whitman that “he had seen on Mr. Harlan’s desk a volume of *Leaves of Grass*, in blue paper covers, and the pages of the poems marked more or less throughout the work” (in Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 3 [New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914], 475). These “blue paper covers” indicate that this edition was Whitman’s “Blue Book”—his personal, annotated copy of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*.

2 For accounts of the brief time Whitman spent at the Bureau, see Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 344-350; Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 303-306; and Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 283-295, and *Walt Whitman’s Champion: William Douglass O’Connor* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1978), 54-65.

3 Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America College Editions, 1997), 1035.

4 Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). I want to clarify that, in arguing that Whitman places his sexual themes at the forefront of his third edition, I am avoiding broad claims about Whitman’s career trajectory *vis-à-vis* his sexual politics. These concerns fall outside the purview of my discussion here. It is worth noting, however, the range of readings gay, queer, and feminist critics have offered: some claim that Whitman reaches the peak of his sexual-political radicalness with the third edition and subsequently becomes more conservative (the common narrative). M. Jimmie Killingsworth, on the other hand, notes a “progressive chastening of Whitman’s sexual politics and the corresponding changes in his poetics” from the *first* edition onward (xix). See his *Whitman’s Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

5 For brief but illuminating twentieth-century histories of homophobic Whitman criticism, see Martin, 3-8, and Erkkila, “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 153-171. As Erkkila notes, this tradition “has insisted on silencing, spiritualizing, heterosexualizing, or marginalizing Whitman’s sexual feelings for men” (153). But Erkkila also takes many gay male critics to task for having “tended to maintain a distinction between Whitman the private poet and Whitman the public poet, Whitman the homosexual poet and Whitman the poet of democracy, that unduly privatizes and totalizes Whitman’s sexual feeling for men” (153). Instead, she argues that the public and the private, the political and the erotic cannot be disentangled.

gled. For other important treatments of Whitman in gay, feminist, and queer Whitman criticism (though this list is by no means exhaustive), see Erkkilä, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Byrne Fone, *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992); Alan Helms, "Whitman's 'Live-Oak with Moss,'" in *The Continuing Presence*, 185-205; Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Michael Warner, "Whitman Drunk," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkilä and Jay Grossman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30-43.

6 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

7 In my discussion of the 1860 *Leaves* and particularly the "Calamus" cluster, readers may note that I forgo discussion of Whitman's "Live Oak, with Moss" sequence, which has gained critical traction over roughly the last two decades. Since Alan Helms published "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss,'" critics have debated over whether this sequence is a personal, private, and more emotionally fraught poetic precursor to the more public, political, and more celebratory "Calamus" sequence. I focus on the 1860 edition proper because of its more significant presence in gay and lesbian, feminist, and queer traditions of Whitman criticism. It is worth noting, however, that I am skeptical of the neat division of public and private that this debate seems to maintain. Certainly, the logics of settler colonialism that I am tracing here can also be found in the "Live Oak, with Moss" sequence; however, it is outside the scope of this essay to track their different iterations. See Helms's essay in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life*, ed. Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 185-205. Hershel Parker's "The Real 'Live-Oak, with Moss': Straight Talk about Whitman's 'Gay Manifesto'" is highly critical of both Helms's interpretation and his reprinting practices (*Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51 [1996], 145-160). See also Helms's and Parker's rather heated exchange the following year (in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 [1997], 413-416). Finally, for an excellent overview of the textual and critical history of "Live Oak, with Moss," as well as rich and insightful readings of the sequence, see Betsy Erkkilä's afterword in *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 99-162.

8 See Reddy's *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 18.

9 As Ann Stoler contends, "the discursive and practical field in which nineteenth-century bourgeois sexuality emerged was situated on an imperial land-

scape where the cultural accouterments of bourgeois distinction were partially shaped through contrasts forged in the politics and language of race” (*Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1995], 5). Scott Lauria Morgensen builds upon Stoler’s insights by drawing close attention to the biopolitics of settler colonialism in a specifically U.S. context. He makes the historical argument that “[the] late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw institutions and discourses of modern sexuality proliferate along with the ‘closure’ of the frontier as a central feature of national consciousness in a white settler society.” He argues further that “[settler] colonialism is a primary condition of the history of sexuality in the United States” (*Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011], 42). Morgensen’s provocative claim challenges scholars to interrogate the settler colonial logics of Whitman’s sexual-political project. In analyzing the queer nationalism of Whitman’s 1860 work, I am indebted to recent work in queer Native studies, and particularly to Mark Rifkin’s *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Here Rifkin theorizes the specifically *literary* significance of the biopolitics of settler sexuality. Tracing modes of what he calls “queer antistatism” in canonical texts in nineteenth-century American literary studies, Rifkin argues that, “while opening room for envisioning queer possibilities for occupancy and selfhood (deviations from nuclear domesticity), these writings treat processes of settlement as a given in developing their ethical visions” (3). Where my analysis departs from Rifkin’s work, however, is in its attention to queerness that consolidates and depends upon—in fact endeavors to *reproduce*—the U.S. nation-state.

10 My focus on “quotidian” articulations of queer intimacy and belonging is influenced also by Rifkin’s work, as he is invested in theorizing the ways in which settler colonialism might be “naturalized” in those articulations.

11 For works that examine Whitman’s imperialist tendencies, see Leadie Clark, *Walt Whitman’s Concept of the American Common Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955); Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman’s Native Representations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Walter Grünzweig, “Noble Ethics and Loving Aggressiveness: The Imperial Walt Whitman,” in *An American Empire: Expansionist Cultures and Policies 1881-1917*, ed. Serge Ricard (Aix-en-Provence: University of Provence Press, 1990), 151-165; and Albert Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935).

12 Whitman, “All About a Mockingbird,” *New York Saturday Press* (January 7, 1860, 3). Available on the *Whitman Archive*.

13 Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier. 6 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1:353.

14 Jason Stacy, "Introduction." *Leaves of Grass, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition*, ed. Jason Stacy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), xviii-xxi.

15 Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 130.

16 "proto-, comb. form." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, July 2017. Web.

17 As Jason Stacy argues, "Proto-Leaf" "[frames] a cosmos" (xxiii, emphasis mine). Establishing the term "proto's" rhetorical connection to the Book of Genesis, Stacy suggests that the poem's first stanza, whose first and last lines are "Fresh, free, savage/ Solitary singing in the west, I strike up for a new world," "[appeals] to original creation and unencumbered living. . . . 'Proto-Leaf,' like Genesis, [establishes] the parameters for the rest of the stories, visions, and exhortations: past and future [collapse] in the poet's seminal nature as he [guides] the reader *back* to a new world" (xxiii).

18 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Emerson's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 27.

19 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 5. Available on the *Whitman Archive*. All references to Whitman's poetry are from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

20 For a fuller account of the continuous present tense in Whitman's poetry, see Mark Kinkead-Weeks, "Walt Whitman Passes the Full Stop By," in *Nineteenth Century American Poetry*, ed. A. Robert Lee (Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1985), 56-59.

21 Whitman does not capitalize the word "west" in the 1860 edition. In later editions, he would do so regularly. This suggests a marked historical shift in the concept's definitions: in the yet "unsettled" "west" of this edition, the word carries, to my mind, more amorphous symbolic meanings, whereas the later "West" assumes that the act of settling has not only occurred but stabilizes its geographic and ideological meanings.

22 In another memorable moment, Whitman positions himself in the South—specifically Alabama (14). This, along with his references to Canada, Cuba, and Mexico, suggest that his nationalist-expansionist vision was not only directed westward but in other directions as well.

23 I mark heterosexuality in quotations because the term "heterosexual"—like its counterpart, "homosexual"—was not, in 1860, an established identity category. It is commonly remarked by scholars of sexuality that the category "homosexual" in fact preceded "heterosexual." "Homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" were "invented" categories of identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, respectively, in Europe and the U.S. For discussions

of these histories, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). On the co-implicated histories of this “invention” and discourses of race, see Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). For a more recent account of the queer temporalities and affective lived experiences of literary figures negotiating these shifting discourses, see Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

24 For three brilliant discussions of nineteenth-century U.S. discourses of teleological modernity and the “death of the Indian,” see Renée Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000); Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); and Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

25 This is Ed Folsom’s insight. See “Whitman and American Indians” in *Walt Whitman’s Native Representations*, especially 80-88. Whitman’s poem might invite a contrast to the popular poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney, whose poem “Indian Names” insisted on the ethical challenge to “modernity” presented by the embeddedness of “Indian” nomenclature on the land. There the temporality of Indian presence is far more complex. On one hand, Native Americans seem to have all but “disappeared”; on the other, she signals ongoing disputes and violence. Never, though, is their death presented as the inevitable sign of American progress.

26 I borrow this phrase from Peter Coviello’s *Tomorrow’s Parties*.

27 “Adhesiveness” was a phrenological term that denoted one’s capacity for emotional attachment. Whitman, Michael Lynch argues, reframed this term to refer specifically to same-sex attachments. His is still the best study to my knowledge that relates theories of phrenology to the history of sexuality and Whitman’s place in that history (“‘Here Is Adhesiveness’: From Friendship to Homosexuality,” *Victorian Studies* 29 [1985], 67-96). Another phrenological term Whitman deployed was “amativeness,” which described men’s capacity for attachment to and sexual desire for women and vice versa.

28 Recent historical work has shown that queer intimacies were very real features of the “American frontier” social and geographic landscape. See Peter

Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

29 Michel Foucault first develops this theory in the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. He would elaborate on this later in some of his lectures, particularly his lecture of March 17, 1976, in “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 239-264.

30 Pollak, 124.

31 Folsom, 85.

32 On Whitman's interest in evolutionary theory, and especially Lamarckism, see James T. F. Tanner, “Walt Whitman, Poet of Lamarckian Evolution” (Ph.D. diss., Texas Technical College, Lubbock, 1968); Frederick W. Connor, *Cosmic Optimism: A Study of the Interpretation of Evolution by American Poets* (Gainesville, FL.: University of Florida Press, 1949), 92-127; and Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press).

33 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15 (2003), 24. The term “contact zone” derives from Mary Louise Pratt's 1991 article, “Arts of the Contact Zone.” While I have insisted on maintaining use of the term “frontier” in relation to Whitman, I do so because I believe it conceptually most closely resembles Whitman's understanding of and poetic treatment of U.S. borderlands and contact zones. This understanding/treatment has a long imperialistic history and contains within it the supposition of inevitable American expansion, one that is ethically suspect to say the least. I use “contact zone” here to highlight the inter- and intra-culturality of these spaces. The histories of these spaces are far more complex, and terms such as the “contact zone” or Gloria Anzaldúa's “borderlands,” allow a more capacious understanding of their complexities. See Pratt's “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991), 33-40; and Anzaldúa's still-provocative and generative *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

34 Morgenson, 16.

35 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, NY, 1855), 13, 25. Available on the *Whitman Archive*.