

# Whitman's Homotextuality, Homopolitics, and Homonationalism: A Case for Historicist Parallel Reading\*

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## Abstract

This essay puts forth *historicist parallel reading* as a solution to the particular quandary facing anyone engaged in Walt Whitman studies, namely that almost antipodal views, rather than proximate agreements, still arise on any topic concerning the poet and his *oeuvre*. This essay seeks to demonstrate the efficacy of this reading strategy by focusing on three of Whitman's interrelated core thematics. First, the *homotextuality* of *Leaves of Grass* is examined critically to show how it was generally misrecognized and, instead of being totally dismissed, should be relocated in the existence of a coded (and

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thereby hidden) level paralleling the open one—which hereby suggests the poet’s possible self-awareness of his (sexual) minority status, best described as *para*-homosexual. The essay then considers more closely the specific contents of Whitman’s *homopolitics* (the hidden level of his openly promoted democratic comradeship) by working through critical theorizations addressing squarely the “homosexual” dimensions of his political propositions. Finally, Whitman’s subscription to US national ideology and hence endorsement of white supremacy and glorification of imperialism, which may arguably have contributed to his canonization as well as the transmission of his homotextual messages and homopolitical ideals, are raised for a homonationalist critique. However, his more widespread reputation as a democratic internationalist and pro-immigration multiculturalist has provided more affirmative views on the matter and thus complicates it from a historical perspective.

**Key Words:** male friendship, open/secret, cruising strangers, ancient Greek model, American literary canon

Walt Whitman's *oeuvre* and person prove to be so riddled with ambiguities and ambivalences that despite, or because of, great advancements in recent researches, antipodal views rather than proximate agreements can still arise on any topic.<sup>1</sup> Instead of seeing these as sources of nuisance that require greater efforts to overcome and (before that can be achieved) are often disavowed, this essay proposes to recognize them as inbuilt characteristics of Whitman that can be better accommodated, and illuminatingly exploited, by what I call *historicist parallel reading*. By *parallel*, I mean seeking to accommodate, rather than dissolving, different (levels of) significations of a text and/or an author on any single topic when they conspicuously conflict with one another; although the means of achieving this accommodation may differ for each occasion, it is found to be predominantly *historicist* in Whitman's case, which is mostly the overdetermined result of the intermeshing of Whitman's past and our present. This essay will demonstrate this by focusing on three of Whitman's interrelated core thematics, namely: 1) the real transgression of his representation of intra-male intimacy (called *homotextuality* in this essay); 2) the programmatic politics put forth on the basis of this transgression (named *homopolitics* here); and 3) the intersection of this politics with US global ambitions and imperialist expansion (what would be critiqued as "homonationalism" today).

While the early gay recoveries (since the 1970s) of Whitman, in the fight against mainstream erasure and cover-up, claimed him *tout court* as a pioneering gay author,<sup>2</sup> later queer readings (since the late 1990s) have complicated the matter by pointing out not just his mostly *pre*-homosexual context but his textual/personal

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<sup>1</sup> As Matt Cohen acutely puts it, speaking of the latest developments of Whitman studies: "we get a Whitman whose very political radicalism, whose commitment to an expanded self and a deconstruction of the identity categories of his time, seems to have been as much a fertilizer of the seeds of today's retrograde categories as the queer liberator or the poet of slave" (2020: 6).

<sup>2</sup> The landmark works are of course Robert K. Martin's series of articles that later constitute the first half of *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1998).

wavering on the assumption of any “sexual” identity.<sup>3</sup> That is why Peter Coviello’s earlier assertion on Whitman’s evasiveness would certainly beg the question when it is esteemed thus:

Whitman’s refusal in “Calamus” to define sex as a quality of attachment fundamentally distinct from any other—his refusal to circumscribe sexuality in any definite set of acts or relations—constitutes what is arguably the most consequential intervention in American sexual ideology he would ever make. (2005: 144)

For to call Whitman’s textual *praxis* of circumlocution a “refusal” and an “intervention” clearly presupposes the existence of a certain “sexual” knowledge, which might not have been as yet solidified at that time, though it was already in the air. In contrast, Coviello’s later revision is more on the mark when he emphasizes

the messy misalignments—the uncoordinated points of partial overlap and unbridgeable disconnection—between the complex, modern senses of identity and affiliation that might be heard echoing in a commonplace term like “gay,” on the one hand, and on the other Whitman’s own experience of erotic being and erotic life. (2013: 6)

The nineteenth century, as we have come to know, was actually a muddled transitional period between paradigms and “those [new sexual] definitions are neither historically stable . . . nor internally coherent” (Sedgwick, 1991: 155).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The most influential is no doubt Michael Moon’s *Disseminating Whitman*, which sharply pinpoints the textual characteristics of *Leaves of Grass* as the “‘fluidity,’ substitutability, and indeterminacy of masculine identity and sexuality” (1991: 38).

<sup>4</sup> By calling this “the *earliness* of the erotic being,” Coviello later means to capture “the experience of sexuality as something in the crosshairs of a number of forms of knowledge and regulation *but not yet wholly captivated or made coordinate by them*” (2013: 7)—in other words, *pre-* in “pre-homosexual” does not mean total ignorance or lack of connections but the condition before the consolidation and predomination of the homosexual paradigm. There are, after all, not just points of “unbridgeable disconnection” but of “partial overlap” in those “messy misalignments” (6).

Hence, in the first section of this essay, I will seek to demonstrate how the Whitmanian textuality was both pre-homosexual and *para*-homosexual—in the sense that most of what is now regarded as homosexual representation in *Leaves of Grass* was actually nothing out of the ordinary at the time of its publications. Yet a certain homotextuality can still be argued because the volume indeed bears uncanny signs of resemblance to this later-predominant formulation, most evidently in *the two levels of signification* (one open, one coded) that inform the “Calamus” cluster poems concentrated on intra-male intimacy. That is to say, the proposed practice of parallel reading does not work just for historical contexts, but for Whitman’s texts as well, and the two are deeply correlated.

In the second section, the essay will turn to Whitman’s promotion of such (transgressive) intra-male intimacy as the (hidden) core of his programmatic politics of democratic comradeship. As Whitman himself unequivocally declares in “Preface, 1876, to L. of G. and ‘Two Rivulets,’ Centennial Edition”:<sup>5</sup>

To this terrible, irrepressible yearning, (surely more or less down underneath in most human souls)—this never satisfied appetite for sympathy, and this boundless offering of sympathy—this universal *democratic comradeship*—this old, eternal, yet ever-new interchange of adhesiveness, so fitly emblematic of America—I have given in that book, undisguisedly, declaredly, the openest expression.

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<sup>5</sup> Originally titled “Preface” and opening *Two Rivulets*—the accompanying volume to the 1876 edition that contained new poems and essays (including *Democratic Vistas*)—it was later retitled thus as preface to the two volumes together. To simplify citations, I have not listed all separate pieces as independent items in references: while individual titles are given in the text, the citation refers only to the collection in which they can be found. Besides, since most materials now can be conveniently accessed on the indispensable *Walt Whitman Archive* (hereafter *Archive*), I have cited all Whitman’s works from their earliest published editions to avoid the anachronistic conflation of later revisions with the original version.

Besides, . . . the special meaning of the “Calamus” cluster of “Leaves of Grass,” (and more or less running through the book, and cropping out in “Drum-Taps,”) mainly resides in its *political* significance. (1892: 285, n., my emphases)

However, except for its early appreciation by the American liberal, leftist, or anarchist thinkers—for example, Vernon Louis Parrington, the reputed founder of American Studies, praised Whitman for bringing “fraternity” (i.e., “the feeling of comradeship”) back into democracy and “exalting it by making it warm and human and social” (“Flesh is kin to flesh”) (1930: 76-77)<sup>6</sup>—the two sides of this corporeal-political project have been largely segregated in later readings and appropriations. While political attention to Whitman’s democracy largely dropped the same-sex aspect, probably due to the establishment and stigmatization of homosexuality, later gay recoveries of Whitman tend to give, if ever, no more than a nod, and more often dismiss it outright as nothing but disguise, diversion, or substitute for homosexual love that was thought to truly want expression but could not be given directly.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in addition to certain prominent scholars who have made particular efforts to rearticulate Whitman’s intra-male intimacy with politics,<sup>8</sup> some critical efforts have explored more

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<sup>6</sup> While Parrington is an example of the early liberal/left appreciations of Whitman, for the anarchist see Kissack (2008).

<sup>7</sup> See Cady (1978: 11) and Railton (1995: 15) for examples across nearly two decades. Gay critics’ dismissal of the political part is rather symptomatic of the *privatizing* tendency of modern sexuality episteme that not just takes the personal to be the political, but *only* the personal to be the political.

<sup>8</sup> Namely, Grossman (1990), Erkkila (2005: 131-154; i.e., the chapter titled “Whitman and the Homosexual Republic,” originally published in 1994), and Reynolds (1995: 401-403). See also Erkkila’s “Introduction” and Grossman’s “Epilogue” to their co-edited volume *Breaking Bounds* (Erkkila & Grossman, 1996) as well as Erkkila (2020: 201-223; i.e., the chapter titled “Public Love: Whitman and Political Theory,” originally published in 2002). However, Erkkila’s (1989: 178-182) slightly earlier *Whitman the Political Poet*, which was crucial for the repoliticization of Whitman after so long, only tangentially touches upon the topic in the chapter promisingly titled “Democracy and (Homo) Sexual Desire.”

concretely the contents of this politics—though they still fail to distinguish between open and hidden levels of signification in Whitman's text as argued here, and are therefore subject to certain anachronistic misreadings. Although it may never be possible to arrive at the “real” message presumably hidden therein, it is hoped that the reading strategy undertaken here will manage to approximate it as more than ever before.

Finally, a constitutive dimension of Whitman's (homo)politics that is nowadays often played down, or simply overlooked—obviously due to its unpopularity with the predominantly progressive attentions to Whitman—lies in his nationalist subscription to the US nation and its global ambitions. This will also be foregrounded for critical examination before being submitted to the same historicist parallel reading, though in slightly different ways and to somewhat different ends. For Whitman has also been well-known for his democratic internationalism and multiculturalist championship of immigration, and hence widely admired around the globe, even by racial minorities within the US. While these glaringly contrary reputations have troubled critics considerably, I will argue that they actually reflect self-contradictions endemic to American national ideology, thus in turn guaranteeing Whitman's canonization and the transmission of his project of (transgressive) intra-male intimacy. This causality, if admitted, would no doubt lead to a homonationalist critique of Whitman. However, paradoxically he used to have a great number of devoted admirers around the globe due to ignorance of or despite a certain knowledge of the matter. This, of course, shows how the changing understandings and contrary judgements of Whitman are also results of having been caught between the intermeshing of past and present.

## I. Transgressive Homotextuality: From Misrecognition to Relocation

While not too long ago Whitman's “dubious” sexuality was

still being erased, denied, or explained away,<sup>9</sup> his status now as a pioneering homosexual writer has been so well established that it seems readily supported not only by biographical details but by passages from *Leaves of Grass* that passionately espouse “comradeship” between men as well as movingly portray scenes of intra-male intimacy. Although recent queer scholarship has largely withdrawn from this simplistic position, most of the withdrawal has been done based on Whitman’s textual wavering rather than contextual reconfigurations that, coming as results of the latest developments of friendship studies (for the most representative work of which see Bray [2003]), should have a more important say on the matter. First of all, since Whitman’s poetic expressions of intra-male intimacy were readily identifiable and outright explicit in *Leaves*, the fact that they were published at that time without arousing difficulties from the reading public nor the authorities indicates,<sup>10</sup> however counterintuitively, that either the nineteenth-century American society was not as averse to those behaviors and expressions (now seen as homosexual), or those behaviors and expressions did not signify to the public at that time what they later would and still do today (i.e., homosexual). Actually, given recent understandings of the *pre*-homosexual condition of same-sex

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<sup>9</sup> See Erkkilä (2005: 132-133) for an example that took place in Long Island’s Whitman Birthplace Museum as late as in 1997. As this and some other paragraphs are deleted from the chapter’s latest version in *The Whitman Revolution*, her most recent collection of essays focused on Whitman (2020), I have cited the piece from its original version.

<sup>10</sup> The poems that Ralph Waldo Emerson famously persuaded Whitman to delete, when walking together in Boston Common, from the 1860-1861 edition to no avail were not what today’s readers tend to presume (i.e., the “Calamus” poems) but those heterosexually explicit ones gathered mostly in the “Enfans d’Adam” (later “Children of Adam”) cluster (Loving, 1982: 105-107). Those poems, once published, indeed incited a heated exchange of attacks and defenses, only—once again counterintuitively—it were mostly male critics on the attack and feminists on the defense (Ceniza, 1998: 190-212; see also Murison, 2020). As late as 1882, these poems still got Whitman into trouble, this time with the Boston district attorney, who demanded excisions before publication of the 1881-1882 edition; for a revealing list of the “problematic” poems, see Loving (1999: 252, 414-415).

intimacy, these two seemingly different possibilities are, in effect, two sides of the same coin, i.e., American society at that time did not take offense to intra-male intimate sentiments and behaviors as delineated in *Leaves* just because they were not as yet read as what was later to be identified as homosexual.<sup>11</sup>

Now we know that the explicit and emotional scenes of intra-male intimacy—looking/cruising, holding hands, kissing on the mouth, sleeping together, and so on—that abound in *Leaves* (from the very first edition) but are articulated most clearly in the (later-added) “Calamus” cluster were actually commonplaces in public behaviors as well as literary descriptions in nineteenth-century America—they were understood as “romantic friendship.”<sup>12</sup> To give just one telling example that appeared as late as 1870 (when traditional intimacy of male friendship reportedly had begun to be shunned), there are passages in *Joseph and His Friend*—a novel authored by Bayard Taylor (an eminent gentleman writer who also acted as diplomat to several countries for the US government) that was first serialized in the respectable *Atlantic Monthly*<sup>13</sup>—describing the eponymous friendship thus:

They took each other's hands. The day was fading, the landscape was silent, and only the twitter of nesting birds was heard in the boughs above them. Each gave way to the impulse of his manly love, rarer, alas! But as tender and true as the love of woman, and they drew nearer and kissed each

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<sup>11</sup> These are not really new findings as quite a few Whitman critics have long acknowledged them, just without the full support now provided by our understanding of the friendship tradition; see, e.g., Killingsworth (1989: 97-111), Reynolds (1995: 391-403).

<sup>12</sup> There are voluminous studies on the topic. For a more polemical study that metacritically examines people's usages of and controversies surrounding the concept, see Oulton (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Taylor himself, after reading *Leaves of Grass*, wrote to Whitman in late 1866 lamenting that “tender and noble love of man for man which once certainly existed, but now seems to have gone out of the experience of the race” (as cited in Martin, 1990: 171). See also Messent (2009: 21) for a similar periodization in terms of the relationship between Mark Twain and his circle of friends.

other. As they walked back and parted on the highway, each felt that life was not wholly unkind, and that happiness was not yet impossible. (2003: 84)

And not just in fiction,<sup>14</sup> but in real life as well:

In nineteenth-century America, same-sex friends of all ages held hands while walking down the streets of cities and towns. Few people regarded it as remarkable when same-sex friends kissed each other “full on the lips” in public or private. Fewer still saw anything unusual in the common American practice of same-sex friends sleeping in the same bed, sometimes for years at a time. (Quinn, 1996: 1)<sup>15</sup>

In comparison, acts of intra-male intimacy as depicted in *Leaves*, even at their most erotic, were in fact nothing out of the ordinary and therefore cannot be really deemed transgressive in themselves.

Whereas this line of argument seems to debunk Whitman’s status as a pioneering “homosexual” poet, I still wish to proclaim the homotextuality of Whitman’s *Leaves* because there indeed exist textual curiosities in the pivotal “Calamus” cluster that are hard to explain otherwise. In the opening poem, readers are immediately puzzled by the speaker’s resigned attitude to retreat to “paths untrodden,” i.e., away from the “the life that exhibits itself, / From all the standards hitherto published . . . / Which too long I was offering to feed my soul” (1860-1861: 341, C1).<sup>16</sup> Once away and

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<sup>14</sup> For a wide sample as well as analysis of nineteenth-century fiction featuring romantic friendship between men, see Nissen’s anthology *Romantic Friendship Reader* (2003) and critical study *Manly Love* (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Although Quinn’s monograph focuses on the Mormons, who were idiosyncratic in many respects from a mainstream perspective, their “same-sex dynamics reflected national patterns” (1996: 2).

<sup>16</sup> As many citations come from the “Calamus” cluster, it will be abbreviated as C plus the number of the poem in the original 1860-1861 edition (they were titled only afterward); e.g., C1 stands for “Calamus” no. 1 poem. And for easy reference, I also add the poems’ later titles as in the definitive “death-bed” edition of 1891-1892. As all poems are cited from their original versions, only significant changes in later editions will be noted; for details on the poems’ sometimes rather

in seclusion, the “standards not yet published” become clear to the speaker and he, “No longer abashed,” now “can respond as I would not dare elsewhere” and “tell the secrets of my nights and days.” However, reading on, we are surprised to find that the supposedly unconventional beliefs and what he holds as secrets are none other than the above-mentioned “manly attachment,” “athletic love,” and “the need of comrades” (1860-1861: 341-342), which were all publicly sanctioned ideals with rather long traditions. Hence the suspicion that the speaker is actually suggesting a secret take on those traditionally cherished ideals, and perhaps even a secret side to himself. For in the poem after the next, he declares: “I am not what you supposed, but far different” (1860-1861: 344, C3; later “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand”);<sup>17</sup> and alerting readers not only about the *truth* of himself and his book—“For these leaves, and me, you will not understand, / They will elude you at first, and still more afterward—I will certainly elude you” (1860-1861: 346)—but also to the *danger* involved: he warns that “my poems [will not] do good only—they will do just as much evil, perhaps more.”<sup>18</sup>

However, the speaker does not seem to be afraid to have the dangerous truth (the hidden message and his real self) known, but that it would *not* be, for he emphatically hints at the end of the above

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convoluted history of revisions, readers are advised to check the highly helpful footnotes in the Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves* (Whitman, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> To deal with this problem of Whitman's, the traditional critical concept of “mask” (persona) has also been deployed (Cowley, 1970: 35-75). Although this concept is helpful in distinguishing different aspects of an author's make-up, its use for analysis would be limited if these aspects are regarded as no more than performances and therefore not to be taken seriously together as a coherent whole.

<sup>18</sup> See also C12 (later “Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?”), which shares the same theme of a different and dangerous personage hiding behind “this façade” (1860-1861: 358); as well as C36 (later “Earth, My Likeness”), where the speaker, after mentioning that “an athlete is enamoured of me—and I of him,” tellingly warns that “toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me, eligible to burst forth, / I dare not tell it in words—not even in these songs” (1860-1861: 374).

poem that “it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book, / Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it” (1860-1861: 346), and “Without one thing all will be useless” (1860-1861: 344), i.e., “without that which you may guess at many times and not hit—that which I hinted at” (1860-1861: 346). While the riddle is not directly solved throughout the cluster, the speaker continues to entice suspecting readers to read on, leaving more and more clues. For example, in the next to last poem,<sup>19</sup> he openly declares: “Here I shade down and hide my thoughts—I do not expose them, / And yet they expose me more than all my other poems” (1860-1861: 377, C44; later “Here the Frailest Leaves of Me”).

Yet how exactly to discern the “secret and divine signs” and “faint indirections” (1860-1861: 376, C41; later “Among the Multitude”) in order to discover the truth? The answer, given in the very same poem, is that it can be done only by “Lover and perfect equal,” i.e., by someone who is both the speaker’s lover and alike the speaker in certain ways, because the latter “mean[s] to discover you by the like in you.” In fact, this combined personage—the speaker’s lover who is the same as the speaker—is proclaimed to be the only person who can crack the code and understand the “real” message. For he not only calls his “follower” someone “who would sign himself a candidate for my affections” (1860-1861: 345, C3), but that person who could become his “élève” has to be someone with “blood like mine circl[ing] . . . in his veins” and someone who is “silently selected by lovers, and . . . silently select[s] lovers” (1860-1861: 377, C42; later “To a Western Boy”). That is, it is only for those “that love, as I myself am capable of loving” that the speaker reserves and gives “the token of comrades—this calamus-root” (1860-1861: 348, C4; later “These I Singing in Spring”).

As if all this were not curious enough, we are also given, in one of the three later deleted poems that appeared only in the 1860

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<sup>19</sup> Moved to less conspicuous position (i.e., the middle) of the cluster in later editions.

"Calamus,"<sup>20</sup> the scene of a forlorn lament for the loss of someone with whom the speaker is clearly in love—which strangely becomes that of a shameful identity crisis:

Sullen and suffering hours! (I am ashamed—but it is  
useless—I am what I am;)  
Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have  
the like, out of the like feelings?  
Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend,  
his lover, lost to him? (1860-1861: 355, C9; [Hours  
Continuing Long])

While it would not make much sense if this were just an ordinary heart-breaking scene of losing a friend/lover, could this really signify what it seems, namely the emerging awareness of someone interpellating himself as a member of a certain "sexual" minority? It surely appears uncannily similar to what later homosexuals usually feel when first learning who they really are as a result of having strong feelings for someone society forbids (i.e., people of the same sex); and deeply astonished at finding this, they wonder whether they are the only ones who feel this way, and whether there are others who feel the same (i.e., people like them). Perhaps for Whitman the answers were already affirmative, for in the "secluded spot" where the speaker retreats in the opening poem of "Calamus," he is not alone but "talked to here by tongues aromatic" (1860-1861: 341, C1); and later, in a more substantial scene recalling

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<sup>20</sup> The other two are C8 ([Long I Thought That Knowledge Alone Would Suffice]) and C16 ([Who Is Reading This?]), which, along with this one, all belong to the original twelve "Live Oak with Moss" poems that form the basis of the "Calamus" cluster. For a critical analysis of the "Live Oak" poems and their transmutations into the "Calamus" cluster, see Erkkilä (2011: 99-130). As to why these three poems were later deleted from the cluster (since the 1867 edition), Erkkilä thinks it "suggests that he [Whitman] sought . . . to suppress the more anguished dimensions of his love for men and to blur the distinction between the public poet and private lover he set forth in 'Long I Thought That Knowledge Alone Would Suffice'" (135-136)—the last point is of particular interest here and for the next section.

nothing but gay cruising, the speaker invites his would-be follower/lover “by stealth, in some wood, for trial, / Or back of a rock,” or “just possibly with you on a high hill—first watching lest any person, for miles around, approach unawares, / Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea, or some quiet island, / Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you” (1860-1861: 345, C3).

Altogether, these curiosities compel us to read them as the covert expression of a minority identity, both for individuals and as a group, that to us looks astoundingly *homosexual*. Is this another case of anachronistic misrecognition or are we truly witnessing one of the early premonitions of what was later to be known as a homosexual identity? Of course, as Alan Helms astutely puts it, to presume “Whitman’s homosexuality helps explain numerous features of his work which might otherwise appear odd or incomprehensible” (1984: 257).<sup>21</sup> However, the situation is not that simple. Although Whitman seemed to have a sense of his own existence as a member of a sexual minority, whether that can be ascribed to a modern homosexual identity still requires elaboration. On the one hand, besides the textual oddities demonstrated above, we also have Michael Lynch’s persuasive presentation of the once popular phrenology’s contribution to the modern conceptualization of homosexuality as well as Whitman’s mediatory role in it. The poet significantly took what had originally been no more than a faculty of *friendship* in phrenology—namely “adhesiveness,” as opposed to “amativeness,” that of *romantic love*—and resignified it into that of friendship and love between people *of the same sex*, as opposed to those between people of the *opposite sex*, thus resulting in a polarity rather similar to that of homosexuality versus heterosexuality (Lynch, 1985: 89-91)—which is said to provide “the ground for John Addington Symonds’s late Victorian formulation, with Havelock Ellis, of the modern ‘homosexual’” (69). On the other

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<sup>21</sup> See also Cady (1985).

hand, the fact that Whitman did not respond all that positively to Symonds's persistent, though mostly circumspect, probing of his "sexuality" for nearly two decades should alert us to otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Whitman's later vehement denial, when eventually confronted by Symonds in 1890, of anything sexual in his formulation of comradeship can be circumstantially explained,<sup>23</sup> his earlier evasions should not be dismissed likewise but might bespeak a self-conceptualization that was not quite the same as Symonds's (i.e., that of the modern homosexual).

After all, "homosexuality" was but one model vying with many others during the nineteenth century in the race to conceptualize same-sex desire (for some other examples see Bland & Doan [1998: 41-72]), and the model of "homosexuality" was in fact suspected to be one "that would not redeem their [Whitman's and Thoreau's] earlier visions so much as fall aslant of them" (Coviello, 2013: 62).<sup>24</sup> Even if we bring in the long-existing different periodization for (homo)sexual identities that dates back much earlier, to the late seventeenth century, this periodization also "position[s] these earlier sexual categories—the molly and the sodomite—as highly proximate to, and for some importantly different from, the conceptualization of the homosexual" (Kahan, 2019: 120).<sup>25</sup> That

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed account of this exchange between Whitman and Symonds as well as Whitman's other British followers, see Robertson (2008: 139-167). Most of the epistolary documents are conveniently excerpted and weaved into a narrative in Katz (1992: 340-351). See also Sedgwick (1985: 202-218) for a brief but insightful discussion of this cross-Atlantic translation of Whitman into the highly different British context.

<sup>23</sup> That is, the denial (and the infamous boast of having six illegitimate children) could be prompted by the growing hostility toward as well as, in some countries, criminalization of same-sex acts near the end of the century, which was clearly referred to in Symonds's final letter of inquiry (Katz, 1992: 348).

<sup>24</sup> For the part on Thoreau, see Coviello (2013: 29-47).

<sup>25</sup> For this earlier periodization in the American context, see Millner's reading (2002), based on Sedgwick's theorization of "homosexual panic" (1985: 88-89), of *Cecil Dreeme*, a novel written by Whitman's contemporary Theodore Winthrop but published even earlier (in 1861) than the aforementioned *Joseph and His Friend*. See also Martin's (1990) equally insightful reading of the novel, which

is why Whitman had better be described as entertaining a *para*-homosexual identity, in the sense that although he did have an awareness of his “sexual” differences from others and of the existence of other people who felt the same like him that altogether look very similar to modern homosexual identity, that awareness might still differ from it on some significant accounts. However, what makes Whitman’s same-sex conceptualization more similar to the modern homosexual is that, despite the still existing possibilities of being accommodated (albeit just barely) within the perimeters of normativity during most of his lifetime,<sup>26</sup> he was foregrounding its differences from normativity as well as reaching out to people who felt as he did in this flaunting way.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, even without those hints and signposts purposely planted in “Calamus,” people who shared the same desire as Whitman might still have been able to read out the hidden level of

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nevertheless ends with a more cautious note on deducing the timing of a certain “homosexual” identity based thereupon; and also Benjamin Kahan (2019: 131-137), who brings this debate into particular focus as well as attempts a brief synthesis of the two different temporalities.

<sup>26</sup> However, there seemed to be one intriguing case of mainstream alarm that Whitman had crossed the line here. An anonymous review of the first edition of *Leaves*—later found to be penned by Rufus W. Griswold, an eminent critic at the time—lambasted the book severely (as did many other reviews) and concluded with the accusation: “*Peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum*” (“that horrible sin not to be mentioned among Christians,” namely “sodomy”) (1996: 27). Besides arriving a bit early (the “Calamus” cluster was still five years in the future), the term “sodomy” was also a highly charged accusation which cannot simply be taken as the equivalent of specific same-sex acts (Bray, 1990). For a particularly enlightening interpretation of Griswold’s accusation in this traditional sense, see Newfield (1996: 94-97, 105-109), which regards it as a reaction more to Whitman’s promotion of “radical” (read: “mass”) democracy or even “anarchism” than to aberrant sexuality.

<sup>27</sup> As to the related same-sex subculture that would also be helpful for claiming such a para-homosexual existence, some critics are pointing at the legendary Pfaff’s (a tavern) on Broadway, where Whitman hung around in his bohemian days (in the early 1860s) as well as his relationship there with a group of young men nicknamed Fred Gray Association (Blalock, 2014).

meanings that beckons to them.<sup>28</sup> Which means the homotextuality of *Leaves* paralleling as a subtext or a system of double entendres was actually structured like an “open secret” (i.e., accessible only to those already in the know)—a textual condition that is astutely described by Sedgwick as “the occluded intersection between a minority rhetoric of the ‘open secret’ or glass closet and a subsumptive public rhetoric of the empty secret” (1991: 164). That is why Whitman’s insistence on indicating the hidden presence of something inside, so as to confirm that people’s suspicion and conjecture are on the right track, clearly signifies his determination to strike a more transgressive new course.

## II. Homopolitics: Between Modern and Ancient

Whitman deployed bountiful labels in *Leaves* to name and promote his favored mode of intra-male intimacy, and these (with the exception of the neologism “adhesiveness”) were drawn either from the tradition of male friendship (with their emphasis on “manly” and “love”)<sup>29</sup> or, as Betsy Erkkila astutely points out (2005: 136), the revolutionary ideals of democratic fraternity that

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<sup>28</sup> I am referring to the poetic lingering, recurrent in *Leaves*, on mainly the young, beautiful, and strong male bodies in passionately adoring terms, which, albeit unnoticed by readers *unlike* Whitman, must have certainly acted as one major beckon to those who felt the same desire. As there is no space for illustrations, it suffices to bring into readers’ attention Whitman’s newly discovered (in 2016) column writings penned in 1858—titled “Manly Health and Training, with Off-Hand Hints toward Their Conditions” (under the pseudonym Mose Velsor)—in which physical “manly beauty” is extolled as “the true ambition” and “the manly form” is glorified as “this wondrous and beautiful structure that never wearies the mind in contemplating its inward and outward mysteries” (2016: 220)—a vision that is indeed fully borne out in *Leaves*.

<sup>29</sup> That is why, besides those generic synonyms as “companionship,” “attachment,” and “affection,” Whitman also used such specific descriptions as “athletic” and “robust” before love to emphasize the male aspect; see, e.g., 1860-1861: 341-342, C1 (later “In Paths Untrodden”); 1860-1861: 364, C19 (later “Behold This Swarthy Face”).

were regarded as crucial for the union of a new republic (hence the military designation “comrade”).<sup>30</sup> Whereas many gay-affirmative critics and readers regard this as nothing but camouflage for, and legitimization of, homosexuality in the guise of time-cherished mainstream ideals and values, I want to resist this assimilation by maintaining the historicist parallel stance put forth above and affirm the independent functionality of this open propagation of publicly sanctioned ideals, even though Whitman might indeed also have had something else in mind as they were declared. After all, we have no reason to ever doubt Whitman’s sincerity in promoting the ideal of democracy.

The question is rather: how can we be sure of the existence of also a hidden level of coded homopolitics parallel to the open one? For one thing, Whitman himself pointedly called what he promoted “a new friendship—It shall be called after my name” (1860-1861: 349, C5);<sup>31</sup> and given that what he promoted were all publicly sanctioned ideals, we are prompted to ask: what was really *new* about his promotion of those ideals, and what could possibly be his *personal* inflection that would necessitate branding it with his name? As Whitman’s open rendition of the friendship-fraternity ideal would be esteemed revivalist rather than something new at his time, the most likely deduction would be that there is, once again, some hidden message in his promotion of democratic comradeship for like-minded people to discover. However, as neither the “Calamus” cluster nor *Leaves* as a whole offers as many clues on this matter as on homotextuality, we can only take a detour by working through

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<sup>30</sup> As Richard Godbeer (2009: 155-192) meticulously traces it, not only did the American forefathers encourage friendship and love between men in their speeches and writings, but contemporaneous newspapers constantly promoted the cause in the most endearing terms. For the abundant real-life stories of friendship around that time, see, besides the main bulk of Godbeer’s book, the first half of Crain (2001).

<sup>31</sup> As the poem was later (after the 1867 edition) broken down to make two new poems, this particular passage was deleted in the process. See Whitman (2002: 531, n. 2).

those recent critical theorizations of Whitman's politics that have taken his homosexual dimension more seriously than others, despite the fact that they generally fail to distinguish between the open and hidden levels of signification in the textuality of *Leaves* as proposed here.

For this purpose, we may well begin with George Kateb, as not only is he one of the earliest modern political theorists who directly tackles the homosexual aspect of Whitman's politics, but his formulation has determined both the framework for, and the orientation of, many following theorizations.<sup>32</sup> Praising Whitman as probably "the greatest" "philosopher of democracy" (1992: 240) based on his own conviction in democracy as what enables "rights-based individualism" (241), Kateb significantly distinguishes between what he calls Whitman's model of "adhesive love, or love of comrades" (259) and that of "sexual cruising—momentary intensities" (260).<sup>33</sup> He prefers the latter model because the former "threatens to suffocate the very individualism of personality" as "one is dissolved in the 'en masse' rather than remaining connected to others as an equal" (259);<sup>34</sup> in contrast, the poet's "cruising" model is affirmed because it "does not betray his most radical individualism" (260) and also accords well with the liberal moral

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<sup>32</sup> The main bulk of Kateb's ideas discussed here is taken from a chapter titled "Whitman and the Culture of Democracy," which was originally published in 1990 as a journal article.

<sup>33</sup> However, Kateb's choice of phrasing is slightly confusing, for the term "adhesive" as used by Whitman is not necessarily associated with the exclusive and stable relationship of comrades. Hence for the sake of clarity, I will designate the two respectively as "love of comrades" and "love of strangers." For a detailed listing and discussion of the term "adhesive/ness" in its various appearances in Whitman's works, see Martin (1998: 33-47).

<sup>34</sup> In a line of thinking that will concern us later, Kateb also warns that Whitman's love of *comrades* "serves the sinister project of nationalism," which is "too close to a conception of group identity, a shared pride in tribal attributes" (1992: 242). Kateb's target of criticism here is actually Samuel Beer's (1984) theorization of Whitman as devoted to "nation-centered purpose" (1992: 368), for this latter description fails to foreground what Kateb regards as Whitman's "real novelty," i.e., non-identarian love (164).

theorists' ideal of sociality, that is, at most "sympathy" between independent individuals (but no fusional love).

Kateb's distinction and preference are largely followed by later theorizations. For instance, Coviello declares that "virtually every strand of Whitman's utopian thought devolves upon, and is anchored by, an unwavering belief in the capacity of *strangers* to recognize, to desire, and to be intimate with one another" (2005: 127, my emphasis). Indeed, the very first time the phrenological coinage "adhesiveness" as appropriated by Whitman appeared in *Leaves*—said to be "not previously fashioned" and "apropos" (1856: 29; "Poem of The Road," later "Song of the Open Road," section 6)—it is immediately followed by: "Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers? / Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls?"—clearly extolling strangers cruising as its prime example. And Whitman constantly praises New York (to be precise, Manhattan) not only for its dashing features of urban modernity, but for the abundant opportunities of just such encounters: "as I pass, O Manhattan! your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love, / Offering me the response of my own—these repay me, / Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me" (1860-1861: 363, C18; later "City of Orgies").<sup>35</sup> Hence Jason Frank also asserts, in more specific terms of politics: "The orchestration of passing glances and longing looks between *strangers* become one important way that Whitman reenvisions forms of the erotics of *citizenship* uncorrupted by partial attachments. He isolates a queer proximity between cruising and citizenship" (2011: 175, my emphases).

What Kateb deems detrimental in Whitman's "love of comrades" (as opposed to that of strangers) may be located in a prominent phenomenon in "Calamus" that many critics have

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<sup>35</sup> See also the earlier "Sun-Down Poem" (1856: 211-223; later "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry")—which appears right before this one—as well as C19 (1860-1861: 364; later "Behold This Swarthy Face"), C22 (366-367; later "To a Stranger"), and "To You" (403; as there are many poems of Whitman's titled as such, this one begins with "Stranger, if you . . ."; see also 2002: 14).

noticed: Jay Grossman, for instance, detects a “public/private oscillation” or “oxymoronic pairings [that] mark the keynote of ‘Calamus’ as a whole” (1990: 209). Indeed, in the cluster, there are roughly equal numbers of poems that glorify camaraderie as a political ideal as those that conspicuously express lack of such concerns for public achievements because what the speaker really cares is the one with whom he is in love. To illustrate, in another poem that appears only in the 1860 edition, the poet first narrates a succession of his progresses—from “obtain[ing] knowledge,” speaking for the American lands, following “the examples of old and new heroes,” to acting as the poet “of the New World” (1860-1861: 354, C8)—only to end up with giving it all up:

For I can be your singer of songs no longer—One who  
 loves me is jealous of me, and withdraws me from all  
 but love,  
 With the rest I dispense—I sever from what I thought  
 would suffice me, for it does not—it is now empty and  
 tasteless to me,  
 I heed knowledge, and the grandeur of The States, and the  
 example of heroes, no more,  
 I am indifferent to my own songs—I will go with him I love,  
 It is to be enough for us that we are together—We never  
 separate again. (354-355)

Almost a textbook case of “dyadic withdrawal”—namely a loving couple, devoted so thoroughly and solely to each other that they become indifferent to or even retire from the outside world<sup>36</sup>—no

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<sup>36</sup> This situation is famously theorized by Freud in the “Postscript” of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921/1957: 140-141); for an extended discussion, see Slater (1963). However, Freud’s theorization is mainly about heterosexual couples, whereas his comments on homosexual ones thereafter are almost the contrary: “It seems certain that homosexual love is far more compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual impulses” (1921/1957: 141)—which may throw some relevant light on the following discussion.

wonder that critics informed by modern political perspectives tend to reject Whitman's comrades in favor of his strangers.<sup>37</sup>

However, despite their shared emphasis on Whitman's cruising strangers, critics, such as Coviello and Frank, actually have rather different angles on the exact homopolitics thus derived. Adopting Benedict Anderson's classic formulation of the nation—as a “political community” that “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1991: 5-6)—Coviello is intent on assimilating Whitman's stranger relationality completely into it: “To be properly American is thus, as Whitman conceives it, to feel oneself related, in a quite intimate way, to a world of people not proximate or even known to oneself” (2005: 129). Although he later brings in the affective side (what he calls “*affect-nation*” [2014: 245]) as a revision of Anderson's rather rational formulation and still cites Whitman as its prime illustration—“Whitman . . . tends to conceive such ‘confidence in community’ in markedly physical, passionate terms: for him, nationality can exist only as a quality of intimacy between persons who, though members of the same nation, are likely unknown to each other” (2005: 207, n. 6)—it is still very much toned down or safely circumscribed within the Andersonian terms by his repeated emphasis on the likely “unknowability” between nationals (most of whom, as he further clarifies, “have never seen one another” [129], thus making “the markedly physical, passionate terms” rather empty).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Helen Vendler's sharp observation: “Only after the physical fails does Whitman become a poet of intimacy with the invisible. Sometimes unable to secure, and always unable to sustain, actual sexual intimacy, Whitman is driven to invent an intimacy with the unseen” (2005: 33). Although Vendler is talking about “the lover-in-futurity,” I think it can also be applied to the public at large.

<sup>38</sup> Although this is a somewhat unfortunate corollary of Coviello's position on the matter, he does effect a certain desexualization of Whitman's politics by this line of argument. He also fends off the assertion that Whitman's agenda is to “make sex public” (the phrase originally from Warner [1996: 42]) thus: “in Whitman sex

In contrast, Frank sees the stranger cruising as a form of what he calls “promiscuous citizenship” (though “promiscuous” means not just “erotic attachment to nonintimates” but “undiscriminating” and “mixed” sociality [2011: 158]). Following Kateb to the full, Frank affirms this form of citizenship as significantly rid of such “partial attachments” (175) as either the “identarian forms” (157) of politics as nationalism or the “personal and partial relations of intimacy” (175), such as the committed mode of comrade love.<sup>39</sup> That is why he insists on what he calls “eroticized impersonality,” because it is “the love that can exist between strangers as strangers, a love and attachment that does not try to convert the stranger into an intimate, but retains a distance, perhaps ‘a pathos of distance.’” Taking his cue from this, James R. Martel groups Whitman with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Leo Bersani as belonging to the “politics of indifference” (2010: 626), which he describes as a “sub-current” in Western political thoughts that regards erotic connection as a “source of dependence” and thus seeks to overcome it by switching to “a kind of public *eros*,” which, for Whitman and Bersani, takes the form of “indifferent public cruising.”<sup>40</sup> However, as I tried to point out in a previous article (Chu, 2019: 198), this form of “antirelationity” (Bersani, 1995: 164), radical as it may seem, in effect fits perfectly with the modern civil society which is said to base its operative relationality on exactly such indifference to

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is public by definition, since for him sociality—other-directedness—has as its foundation an erotic tie” (2005: 155).

<sup>39</sup> This characterization of Frank’s bears a striking resemblance to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s exemplification of Whitman—in *Commonwealth*, the concluding volume of their *Empire* trilogy on globalization—for their resistant “politics of love” (2009: xi-xii). See my (Chu, 2019: 187-198) theoretical articulation of this preposition of Hardt and Negri’s with Bersani’s antisocial theorization of cruising that informs the following discussion.

<sup>40</sup> Although this is a rather accurate analysis of Bersani’s concerned theorization of antirelationality in *Homos* (1995: 113-151), I do not think it applies equally well to Whitman for reasons that will be clear in a moment. Nevertheless, it is still useful for highlighting certain polemical aspects of Whitman’s homopolitics.

strangers.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of Whitman's hidden and likely more sexualized homopolitics, Coviello's nationalism interpretation is obviously too disembodied and desexualized to qualify as its coded message (it is more like an exposition, albeit inaccurate, of Whitman's *open* political agenda); in contrast, Kateb's and Frank's cruising/citizenship line of thinking, with its fuller attention to (homo)sexuality, seems more on the mark. To drive home what Whitman's homopolitics may actually look like in this line of interpretation, Chris Packard's much more explicit rendering may be helpful:

In Whitman's new, revolutionary, sexualized nation, joyful sex should be the responsibility of every citizen . . . . Temporary intimate encounters between autonomous men, continuous cycling of sexual contact between citizens ought to start the love that will eventually grow to define the future nation. Being American ought to mean having multiple partners, temporary liaisons, and bonds between such lovers based on easy physicality, *not emotional entanglements*—regardless of gender, class, or profession. (2006: 80, my emphases)

Although whether this envisioning actually evinces Whitman's subscription to the utopian sexual arrangement espoused by the French socialist Charles Fourier and practiced by American free-love activists is still open to question,<sup>42</sup> this interpretation nevertheless

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<sup>41</sup> As strangers used to pose unknown dangers and therefore needed to be identified as either friends or enemies quickly, the indifference to them that has become possible only with the arrival of modern civil society is praised as one of the latter's major achievements; see Silver's (1990) exposition of this view as held by such classical proponents of civil society as Adam Smith, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Ferguson.

<sup>42</sup> The reason why this suggestion is not considered seriously here is mainly due to the lack of substantial textual evidence. For what I regard as a highly speculative case made for it, see Moon (2006). For a succinct exposition of Fourier in this particular respect, see Calvino (1980/1997: 213-255).

fails to endow the antirelationality for which it argues with any significant political valence—unless utopian sexual libertinism itself is regarded as politically consequential enough—and, as a general problem for the exclusive focus on cruising strangers in Whitman, it is ultimately unable to incorporate the amorous side, which Whitman clearly also values even in such associations, not to mention the stable “love of comrade” for which he strongly yearns. As Martel duly acknowledges: “even in the set of poems that most boldly proclaim a promiscuous and public kind of love, elements of dependence and particularity persist and trouble the poet and poems” (2010: 639).

In fact, if put back into the friendship-fraternity model which Whitman openly espoused, the seemingly inescapable divide between strangers and comrades, so entrenched in the above discussions, in effect cannot hold. For, as Sarah Horowitz explains it for the French Revolution, the friendship-fraternity extension is a continuum on which one was not only theoretically extrapolated from the other but also isomorphic with it. Although, as “another adaptation of the sentimentalist social order” that posits “love” as “the bond of society” (2013: 30), fraternity differs from friendship in its universalist emphasis, this does not mean the two “were seen as conflicting passions; instead, they could be regarded as different forms of the same love for humankind, one of which was more intimate and the other of which was universal.” Indeed, once again as Martel truthfully observes, “Whitman does not appear to regard the admixture of public and private loves as a threat so much as being part of the complicated fabric of desire itself” (2010: 640). That is, even if we see him devoting a fair number of poems in “Calamus” to private yearning for comrades, sometimes even to the neglect of public duties, this does not mean that for Whitman the two were ontologically split and politically opposed as modern political theorists tend to think.

Therefore the cruising strangers model as conceptualized above, though more on the mark than the nationalism one, is

probably still too new for Whitman's homopolitical agenda, at least in contrast to the age-old model of same-sex intimacy readily available to him and his contemporaries, namely the ancient Greek one, which not only saw no split between eros and politics at all but actually entwined the two thoroughly. As Paul W. Ludwig explains:

[One major strand of Greek political discourse] viewed eros as conducive to *homonoia* or "likemindedness," and to civic friendship (*philia*), . . . in which love relationships between pairs of free citizens were thought to foster concord and solidarity, first and foremost in heterosexual marriages, but later among males as a political or military good, for example, in accounts of the Sacred Band of Thebes. At their most idealistic, apologists for this view envisioned a city composed entirely of males. The city itself might then become an erotic association like marriage, that is, an association in which eros was (or contributed to) the cement binding its members together. (2002: 19)

Could the model which Whitman have in mind for his homopolitics possibly be the ancient Greek one of the legendary Theban Army of Lovers? After all, this is a model in which not only the divide between the public and the private did not yet appear but couples, when bonded together as a body, would also make the army/state stronger.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, among the "Calamus" poems, besides glorifying the "city of orgies" (1867: 133, C18),<sup>44</sup> which is taken to be the epitome of strangers cruising, Whitman also intriguingly dreams of "the *new* City of Friends" (my emphasis), i.e., "a city invincible to

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<sup>43</sup> Speaking of the US interest in the classical tradition turning from Rome to Greece around this time, Caroline Winterer explains its motivation in perfect accordance with some of Whitman's professed reasons for promoting comradeship as well as the different temporalities discussed here: "Yet just as they embraced Greek democracy, Americans recruited classicism for a radically new purpose: antimodernism. Rather than looking to antiquity as a guide to the present, they now looked to the remote past as a way to combat such cancers of modernity as materialism, civic decay, industrialization, and anti-intellectualism" (2002: 4).

<sup>44</sup> The phrase, also used as title, was added in the 1867 edition.

the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth" (1860-1861: 373, C34; later "I Dream'd in a Dream"). While most of the time in *Leaves* the speaker is dashing out in expansive moves, this rare adoption of a defensive stance in speaking of being attacked is highly suggestive.<sup>45</sup> Is it possible that the speaker here is actually citing from sources of an altogether different context, like the more embattled ancient Greece? Of course, as the Hellenistic allusions in *Leaves* are not particularly numerous nor systematic in any identifiable way,<sup>46</sup> it would be hard to argue for a full-blown Greek interpretation of Whitman's homopolitics.<sup>47</sup> Yet it nevertheless should also count as one of the possible models from which Whitman's homopolitics could be extrapolated. Although there may

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<sup>45</sup> See also C5, where the two seem to mingle together: "Those who love each other shall be invincible, / They shall finally make America completely victorious, in my name. / . . . These shall be masters of the world under a new power, / They shall laugh to scorn the attacks of all the remainder of the world" (1860-1861: 349-350). And interestingly we do have evidence of Whitman likely to have read *Plutarch's Lives* (1865), whose chapter on Pelopidas is one of the most substantial sources for the Theban Sacred Band; see Herrero Brasas (2010: 113) for an account of this and Kennedy (2006: 291) for one easily accessible original source.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Whitman told us some time later—in "The Base of All Metaphysics," a poem added to "Calamus" since the 1871 edition—that he had studied "the Greek system" (besides the "Germanic" one) and found what underlay it was "The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend" (1871a: 130). As to the even more curious fact that the origin of the word *Calamus* is Kalamos—who in Greek mythology is a boy who fell in love with another, Karpos, and turned into a lamenting reed when the latter drowned—we have no way of knowing for sure whether Whitman was aware of its etymology or not, even though Whitman is known to have been an avid reader (albeit through translation) of the ancient Greek classics (Gummere, 1951: 270-285).

<sup>47</sup> That is probably why the Greek thesis about Whitman, though having been brought up rather early, was never considered earnestly. One of the best known proponent of this thesis is of course Symonds, who in *A Problem of Modern Ethics* (published originally in 1891) not only says that Whitman's description of comradeship reminds him of "the early Greek enthusiasm—that fellowship in arms which flourished among Dorian tribes" (2012: 195)—but namely links Whitman's conception of it "as a social and political virtue" to "the Sacred Band of Thebans" (199). Most recently, Juan Herrero Brasas (2010: 109-116) also supports this thesis, but for reasons different from those provided here.

never be a way to pinpoint the exact contents of Whitman's homopolitical agenda for sure, the possibilities at least have been circumscribed somewhere in between these possible models discussed here.

### III. *Both* Multicultural Internationalism and American Homonationalism

It is evident from the earliest editions of *Leaves* that Whitman intended his (homo)political project to be an intervention on the national scale, so much so that he even idiosyncratically nationalized himself as the very embodiment of the American nation. Not only emphatically declaring himself "Walt Whitman, an American" since the very first edition (1855: 29; 1st poem, later "Song of Myself")—which was foregrounded even further as the phrase became the poem's first title in the next edition (1856: 5)<sup>48</sup>—he also imagined himself as "incarnating this land" (184; "Poem of Many in One," later "By Blue Ontario's Shore"):<sup>49</sup> "If the Atlantic coast stretch, or the Pacific coast stretch, he stretching with them north or south, / Spanning between them east and west, and touching whatever is between them" (185). And probably because of this over-identification, Whitman, despite the interventionary nature of his project, seldom if ever criticized the US in *Leaves*.<sup>50</sup> Instead, he

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<sup>48</sup> However, the title was changed to just "Walt Whitman" from the 1860-1861 to the 1871 editions (hereafter it became "Song of Myself"), and the phrase "an American" was also deleted from the poem since the 1867 edition; see Whitman (2002: 45, n. 2).

<sup>49</sup> The poem is considered to be the poetic version of the 1855 preface as some of its lines are directly taken from the latter (see Whitman [2002: 286, n. 1] for details).

<sup>50</sup> To be fair, Whitman did criticize America—for example in *Democratic Vistas*, he censured rather sharply "our materialistic and vulgar American democracy" (1892: 247, n.) that deterred comradeship—but his critiques occurred mostly outside *Leaves* (except for the prefaces to its different editions); see Loving (2000), Erkkila (1989: 246-259).

praised almost everything existing and happening in the nation, and glorified them all as, like himself, standing for America and therefore beautiful and great. This endorsement, unfortunately problematic from today's point of view, included what the US government had been doing for some time then and what it continued to do during the nineteenth century, mainly the westward expansion and the relentless invasions of other countries (Mexico and those of Native Americans) for that purpose in the name of Manifest Destiny, whose most disturbing consequence was no doubt the gradual but definite decimation of the Indigenous population. As the major events of this process (such as the Indian Removal as well as continuous wars and massacres) took place precisely during his adult lifetime, Whitman in particular could not be excused by his ignorance of them as he had served as clerk, albeit for only half year (in 1865), in the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior and even received Indian representatives in person. Therefore the fact that Whitman remained largely reticent on the Indigenous situation tells a great deal about his stance on the US practices of imperialism and racism at that time,<sup>51</sup> even though he was also reputed to have assumed an Indigenous persona and, sometimes, lamented the disappearance of Native American civilizations.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> As Ed Folsom summarizes it in a comprehensive chapter on Whitman's attitudes toward the Indigenous Americans: "The Indians, Whitman knew, had been abused and treated unjustly, but he also subscribed to the notion of progress and social evolution and believed that it was inevitable and ultimately valuable that America extend itself from sea to sea, in service of the 'larger result' of the 'whole body of the States.' As always with Whitman, union was the overriding good; the only clear thing was the certainty that the Indians themselves would be 'wiped out'" (1994: 57). It is crucial to recognize Whitman's settler colonial mentality as Meiners astutely critiques it, which is also revealingly evident in his stance toward the Australian Aborigines (Griffiths, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> For the former, see Folsom (1994: 62-65); for the latter, see, e.g., Whitman, "The Spanish Element in Our Nationality" (1892: 387, originally published in 1883). See also Nolan (1994) for a monograph that both supports these claims and argues for the indigeneity of Whitman's poetics, linking him further to Pablo Neruda, which will concern us in a moment.

Similarly, despite the fact that Whitman had voiced racially derogative remarks concerning people of other races and even non-Anglo Saxon Europeans,<sup>53</sup> he was famed more for being a great champion of immigration, multiculturalism, and internationalism. As an extension of his (homo)politics of democratic fraternity (and male love), Whitman's internationalist call for global comradeship, articulated quite early in "Poem of Salutation" (1856: 103; later "Salut au Monde!") and reiterated throughout his works, has earned him worldwide praise in response.<sup>54</sup> Yet given his support of acts of US territorial expansion during his lifetime, we can almost be certain of his endorsement of the nation's future overseas feats such as the annexation of Hawaii and the acquirement of colonies after the Spanish-American War (though it is known that he sometimes also voiced sentiments to the contrary). After all, the modern endeavors of European colonization of the world were enthusiastically celebrated by Whitman in poems like "Passage to India" (1871b: 5-15) as unprecedented civilizing advancements.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, how should we make of these apparently antithetical voicings and attitudes? In sum, taken together, Whitman's stance concerning other races and their claim to the American nation is so glaringly self-contradictory that critics are drastically divided on the topic, as either side—i.e., Whitman as a

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<sup>53</sup> See Rubinstein, who insightfully points out that, while "Whitman continued to vigorously defend immigration" (2018: 313), he saw it as nothing but a favored replacement of Native American population (307) and that Whitman in fact "freely participated in the racial stereotypes and pseudoscience of the late nineteenth century" (313). Many illustrations can be found in Whitman's daily comments as recorded by Horace Traubel in *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1906-1996).

<sup>54</sup> See C23 (1860-1861: 367; later "This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful") for a succinct example. However, see Phillips (1994) for an acute critical reading of "Salut au Monde!" that demonstrates Whitman's subscription rather than challenge to his contemporaneous racial thinking.

<sup>55</sup> For a detailed reading of this poem that confirms most of what is said here but still argues for a postcolonial ambivalence on Whitman's part, see Paryz (2012: 178-203).

progressive multiculturalist/internationalist versus him as an old-time racist/imperialist—could both find ample evidences supporting their opposed assertions.<sup>56</sup> While traditionally critics have tried to explain this away by attributing it to the seemingly entrenched split between *Leaves* and Whitman's prose works, this could work only to an extent as more and more critical readings reveal *Leaves* to be far from innocent on these matters. Therefore, rather than seeking to determine at pains which represents the real Whitman, the historicist parallel reading undertaken here propose that we accept the possibility that *both* might be equally valid concerning him, and seeks to affirm this ambivalence by contextualizing it within a bigger picture, namely the bifacial US liberal stance on both domestic race issues and the international cause of democracy that gradually took shape during the nineteenth century and eventually became dominant. From this perspective, Whitman's ambivalent racial attitudes and internationalism bordering on imperialism in effect can be said to have pretty accurately grasped (or even actively contributed to) the American mainstream "faultline" of entertaining not only a utopian idealism of multicultural diversity that has paradoxically coexisted with the harsh reality of racial hierarchy and quotidian racism,<sup>57</sup> but also a promotion of global democracy that

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<sup>56</sup> This is especially elaborate and telling in his stance toward the African American people. See, for example, Klammer (2006) and Folsom (2000) on the side of seeing Whitman as racist, and Wilson (2018) and Li (1993, 1994) on that seeing him as much better. But even for these critics firmly on either side, they still acknowledge some exceptions to their general judgement (see Klammer [1995] for the intriguing case of 1855 edition, and Li [1993: 183-184] for one case of racist slur on Asians). For a metacritical analysis of this critical quandary, see Outka (2002: 293-301). As to Whitman as internationalist or imperialist, see Grünzweig for both an early critique of Whitman's internationalism as imperialism (1996) and a later reappraisal of his imperialism as globalism (2018). Grünzweig's shifts of attitude are symptomatic of Whitman's ambiguities and ambivalences tackled here, though his justification for them has more to do with the changing situations of his own critical enunciations (2018: 249-250).

<sup>57</sup> See Ali Behdad's succinct analysis, along similar lines, of how *Leaves* "has remained a powerful ur-text for the discourse of multiculturalism in the United States" (2005: 79). For the useful critical concept of "faultline," see Sinfield (1992:

has nevertheless posited the US as the hegemonic leader of the world.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, I want to suggest that this perfect congruence between Whitman and the American nation may actually explain his later canonization as *the* American poet, which then collaterally secured the survival and eventual dissemination of his more radical visions. Various critics have attempted to explain Whitman's slow but "inevitable" canonization in American literature and, despite their differences, all agree to a high degree of fulfillment of (even collusion with) the ideological demands of American (literary) nationalism on his part.<sup>59</sup> Yet they all seem to miss the point put forth here, one that can be further illustrated by a short detour through Henry Abelove's (2003: 29-41) articulation of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* with the 1990s' activist group, Queer Nation. Toward the end of his short but meandering essay, Abelove eventually comes to the significant fact that Thoreau moved to his lakeside cabin on the Fourth of July, thus beginning his "eccentric" (29, 32)—read: non-domestic, amatrimonial, and erotically homosocial—life at a date that symbolizes the birth of the American nation, a gesture that Abelove regards as significantly betokening his "identification with the nation" as well as the identity of "[h]is project and the nation's" (39). That is, despite his defiant stance, Thoreau still needs the (American) nation "for legitimation, for inspiration, for a forum for his cultural production"; in other words,

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40-41).

<sup>58</sup> As Erkkilä insightfully comments, Whitman was "mythologizing America's political system not as *a* system but as *the* system, whose spread over the entire earth is represented as both natural and inevitable. This celebration of American democracy as the superior political system and the American race as the superior breed continues at the very center of later editions of *Leaves of Grass*" (1994: 67). And quite a few studies point out that this sense of US superiority on Whitman's part is not just jingoistic but racial at base, which consisted in a strong Anglo-Saxonism and hierarchical denigration of all other races and ethnicities; see, e.g., Kim (2006).

<sup>59</sup> Morris (1995: 27-53), Beach (1996: 36-41), Bloom (1995: 247-271).

he “represents himself as despising the American state quite as much as he requires the American nation.”<sup>60</sup> In effect, in order to survive and even to change their situations, minorities in the US have long learned, like Thoreau did, to put themselves in the national center as the best possible strategy.<sup>61</sup> After all, as Alan Sinfield insightfully remarks concerning Tony Kushner’s quickly canonized play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993, 1994): “it seems that only one theme is prized in US writing: the history, condition and destiny of ‘America’” (1999: 206).

Therefore, it is arguably *because* Whitman’s stance on race issues and international democracy colluded so perfectly with the soon-to-be-dominant US ideology that he was eventually granted the canonical status as *the* American poet, which then as a corollary facilitated the widespread transmission of his transgressive homotextuality and homopolitics. Yet this collusion with the American nation, from today’s perspective, would inevitably lend itself to a critique of homonationalism as sharply conceptualized by Jasbir K. Puar (2007).<sup>62</sup> For, in this line of collateral causality, Whitman’s internationalist call for democratic camaraderie would be so deeply bundled with the American national ideology that any positive response would entail a subscription to his Americanist stance, or at least to a certain acceptance of the American cultural hegemony. Of course, Whitman’s internationalist (para-homosexual) camaraderie propagated as an progressive coalition led by the US

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<sup>60</sup> Abelove thus insightfully interprets Queer Nation not in terms of separatism but in its “claim to [national] centrality” (2003: 40): i.e., “What Queer Nation really means is America” (41).

<sup>61</sup> For an enlightening illustration of this, see Edward Whitley’s *American Bards*, a comparative study of Whitman and three other “unlikely candidates for national poet,” all of whom belonged to minorities but “positioned themselves with respect to the nation much as Whitman did” (2010: ix). However, Whitley’s discussion of them ventures beyond the national and focuses mainly on their sub-national and supranational affiliations.

<sup>62</sup> However, as far as I know, there are not as yet any critics who use this very term for a critique of Whitman, even though they are already driving at that direction. See Meiners (2018), Rimby (2021).

was still very different from our contemporary homonationalism; for one thing, it was not really “a collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism that is generated *both* by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves” (Puar, 2007: 39, emphasis added)—surely the American nation could not possibly be aware of the full package of what it has thus endorsed in Whitman until much later. Yet this retrospective critique still foregrounds certain important tendencies embedded in Whitman’s *oeuvre* as well as in its domestic/international contexts, though their full significance has become clear to us only recently.

However, historically speaking, what runs parallel to this contemporary retrospective critique is the caveat that none of these aspects of Whitman’s found problematic today were particularly offensive by his contemporaneous standards; on the contrary, most of them were actually viewed as outrageously progressive at the time. At least that was how the world in general and most racial minorities within the US took him to be until not so long ago. For the former, it should be noted that the international cult of Whitman amongst men of letters around the globe probably has been the most prevalent and zealous for any writer ever, as can be conveniently testified to by Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom’s (1995) comprehensive volume *Walt Whitman and the World*. To explain this curious phenomenon, they observantly suggest that “Whitman’s influence has been most dramatically apparent in countries that are in the midst of democratic revolutions and deep social change” (4), i.e. their enthusiasms for Whitman have clearly served the purpose of taking inspirations and supports from the US democracy as propagated by and embodied in the poet himself. While some may object that it is because the world still needed some time to understand what really lies behind t/his American ideology and its worldwide spread, the case of Latin America, the earliest target of the US imperialist agenda and also one of its most outspoken objectors, is particularly intriguing. For why is it that we find the

most enduring legacy of Whitman's influence there,<sup>63</sup> which sometimes were even mobilized for its *anti-imperialist* protests against the US? Leave aside the early examples, such as Rubén Darío,<sup>64</sup> who are often said to be not fluent enough in English to read Whitman in the original or simply not having read enough Whitman,<sup>65</sup> but how about the much later Pablo Neruda who was also a devout communist (a Stalinist, to be precise)?<sup>66</sup> How is it that, as late as the 1970s, while the most famous critical work debunking Whitman as racist, imperialist, and anti-Mexicanist (authored by Gonzáles de la Garza [1971]) had already been published in Spanish in Mexico, Neruda still accoladed Whitman enthusiastically (see, among other things, his speech to the New York P.E.N. convention: "We Live in a Whitmanesque Age" [1998])<sup>67</sup> and, following the Latin American literary tradition mentioned above, chose to attack the Nixon administration for subverting the Chilean government in a long poem that begins "by invoking Walt Whitman" (2003: 825)?

To give a simple answer to this complicated question, George B. Handley rightly concludes: "Too much, it would appear, was at stake to be critical of Whitman" (2007: 93). Indeed, Whitman must have provided progressive people (not just in Latin American but all around the world) like Neruda resources that were not only highly

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<sup>63</sup> For succinct accounts, see Alegría (1995), Nolan (1994: 18-34).

<sup>64</sup> In protesting against the US support of Panama's independence from Columbia, Darío opens his 1904 strong rebuttal poem "To Roosevelt"—addressed to President Theodore Roosevelt—thus: "It's with a biblical voice, or with a verse by Walt Whitman, / that it would be fitting to approach you, Hunter!" (2012: 151). For Darío in general and the particular context of this poem, see Morrow (2008: 218-222).

<sup>65</sup> Even the translations they read were said to be not directly from the English original and also highly biased in the poems selected; see Santí (2005: 66-83).

<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, the Soviet affirmation of Whitman was rather consistent (Zassoursky, 1994). Even into the Cold War era when the USSR was in direct confrontation with the US, the official stance was still "to point to him as an example of a once idealistic, hopeful, and politically progressive country that has since become a traitor to its own origins" (Grünzweig, 2007: 350).

<sup>67</sup> For Whitman's longtime influence on Neruda, see Nolan (1994: 13-18).

useful but in effect irreplaceable by others, hence making himself indispensable despite whatever problems there were with his works. Which obviously also explains the unreserved admiration of him by African American writers of the early twentieth century. In a series of articles (Hutchinson, 1989, 1992, 1994) demonstrating Whitman's influence on the Harlem Renaissance writers (like Langston Hughes, many of whom not only adored Whitman but even declared themselves his "descendants" [Hutchinson, 1994: 212]), George B. Hutchinson enlighteningly demonstrates how those writers and critics did not take offense at Whitman's representations of African Americans that critics have found problematic today; and, if that was because of a failure to notice, they did not change their positions on the matter even when informed of those problematic aspects.<sup>68</sup> In an uncanny historical coincidence, does not this mixed response also reflect back upon the disavowed challenge facing the critical stance of homonationalism itself, namely that not too ago (or even today) the metropolitan promotions of the worldwide LGBT causes thus critiqued actually were (or still are) regarded as extremely helpful by people around the globe who have been prejudiced against or even persecuted just for being so identified? Apparently political critiques targeting the domestic and the international are not always neatly aligned, and those launched from different positions often require different, hence sometimes conflicting, uses of the same resources.

As Hutchinson rightly explains the multivalence of Whitman's *oeuvre*: "This is as attributable to the interests, needs, and imaginations of his readers and the contexts in which they read him

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<sup>68</sup> As late as the 1950s, Hughes still glorified Whitman as "Negroes' First Great Poetic Friend, Lincoln of Letters," whom "Negroes should read and remember" (as cited in Klammer, 1995: 1). Even after an African American professor of English pointed out the "truth" of Whitman's problematic racial stances, Hughes still stood his ground and defended his position thus: "[Many great people] have not always been great men and women in their every day thoughts, speech or ways of living," but it is "the best of him that we choose to keep and cherish, not his worst" (as cited in Klammer, 1995: 2). See also Wilson's discussion (2014).

as to the ideological ambiguities of his poetry” (1994: 212). Indeed, the two are so intertwined in Whitman’s case that sometimes we cannot tell which is the real cause for the paradoxical co-existence of antipodal views on a single topic. Yet no matter on the textual or contextual level, what we need in dealing with the situation is not a better judgement on how to choose the right interpretation, but a reading strategy capable of accommodating the contradictions, incongruities, and incompatibilities of different readings, just like the historical parallel reading proposed here. For these critical oppositionalities in Whitman studies often reflect not only textual ambiguities but historical faultlines engendered between the past and the present as they intermesh with each other. Though eventually hinging on the open vs. coded levels of textual signification, the trouble with the homotextuality of Whitman’s *oeuvre* is in effect mainly caused by the transitional disjunctions between the old male friendship tradition and the emergent sexual regimes within which he was caught. Similarly, his homopolitics, as close as can be managed to approximate here, is also found to be strained somewhere in between the new stranger cruising mode and the ancient Greek one. Finally, the move from his position of internationalist promotion of democratic comradeship to that of homonationalist subscription to the US imperial hegemony reflects our own changing understandings of American democracy and its global ambitions. Whitman is no doubt an extremely complicated author, both in terms of his *oeuvre*/person and the different contexts that have incited people’s readings whereof, and all this requires a fair degree of metacritical sophistication to do him justice.

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## 惠特曼的同性文本、同性政治與同性國族主義： 一個歷史主義式平行閱讀的主張

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### 摘 要

本文提出歷史主義式平行閱讀的策略，以更具突破性地處理惠特曼研究至今仍不時出現的南轅北轍狀況。文章透過其作品的三個核心主題論證此點。首先，《草葉集》的同性文本性是如何被誤認且應重置於秘密編碼之平行文本中。其次，透過批評辨析那些正視其同性面向的政治詮釋，以逼近平行於公開宣揚底下的同性政治的具體內容。最後則直面惠特曼多元種族主義與國際主義名聲之外對於美國國族主義乃至帝國擴張的認同，指出正因其符合了美國國家意識形態故而確保了典律地位與同性傳承，這在今日雖會引發同志國族主義的爭議，但在歷史上則曾發揮過重要的進步解放作用。

**關鍵詞：**男性友誼、公開／秘密、陌生釣人、古希臘模式、美國文學典律