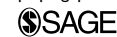


# Whitman's Sympathies

Jane Bennett<sup>1</sup>

Political Research Quarterly  
2016, Vol. 69(3) 607–620  
© 2016 University of Utah  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1065912916656824  
prq.sagepub.com



## Abstract

This essay explores five figures of “sympathy” at work in Walt Whitman’s writings, with a focus on *Leaves of Grass*. Of particular note is the way Whitman presents sympathy as not only a moral sentiment but also a more-than-human natural force that draws bodies together. Sympathy was a key term in the lexicon of nineteenth-century American political debates, and we find in Whitman and others elements of a non-modern sense of sympathy as a vital or physical force operating below, through, and beyond human bodies.

## Keywords

Walt Whitman, sympathy, public affects, moral sentiment, *Leaves of Grass*

## Moral Sentiment and Natural Force

*Sympathy* was an important term in the political lexicon of nineteenth-century America. Regularly invoked in debates about abolitionism, the dignity of the white working man, and the inhumanity of the death penalty, sympathy for the suffering of others was thought to have the power to disrupt prejudices, heal antagonisms, and render explicit the common ground between groups separated by differences in appearance, manners, circumstance, or fortune.<sup>1</sup> “And the stream of sympathy still rolls on,” writes William Lloyd Garrison (1852, 131–32) in 1836, “its impetus is increasing; and it must ere long sweep away the pollutions of slavery.”<sup>2</sup> Embedded within a Christian discourse of universal brotherhood, sympathy tended to appear as a moral sentiment, that is to say, as the *cultivated* variety of Rousseauian *pitié* or that “first and simplest operations of the human soul” which “hurries us without reflection to the assistance of those we see in distress.”<sup>3</sup> But though sympathy qua moral sentiment was more deliberate and less spontaneous than *pitié*, it nevertheless retained a sense that its bearers were natural bodies susceptible to affective infusion. Alongside the moralized and inter-personal notion of sympathy as moral sentiment, there also persisted, as Garrison’s invocation of a “stream” that “rolls on” may suggest, an older notion of sympathy as a kind of vital force operating upon bodies from without. And it is sympathy as an *outside, more-than-human, force* that is my focus in this essay.

Scholars often trace the nineteenth-century reformer’s notion of sympathy to Adam Smith’s ([1759] 1976) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which had been reprinted three times in northern American cities by 1822 (De Jong 2013, 1). For Smith, the *imagination* of the sympathizer

plays the dominant role in producing the sympathetic sentiment. Taking little notice of material transmissions or infusions between bodies, Smith’s primary concern was to mark the subjective or self-enclosed character of sympathy. Sympathy is, he says, but our own “conception” of the sensations of another, an “idea” generated by one’s “imagination” and capable of generating only a “weak” facsimile of the pain of another:

Though our brother is upon the rack, . . . our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never . . . can carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations . . . By the imagination we . . . enter *as it were* into his body and . . . form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Smith [1759] 1976, 9, emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

Although the atmosphere of this scene surely must have included influences from the outside, for example, the colors, groans, and odors leaking from our brother’s tortured body, Smith barely acknowledges these provocateurs. Instead, he highlights a nearly endogenous space of human “imagination.” On this model of sympathy, the atmosphere appears not as a field of forces infusing themselves into porous bodies, but as a void that can only be bridged imaginatively: only by a detour through the interior of oneself can one “enter into”—and then only “*as it*

<sup>1</sup>Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Jane Bennett, Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University, 3400 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA.  
Email: janebennett@jhu.edu

were” (a phrase to which I shall return)—the affects pertaining to the other.

In contrast, nineteenth-century invocations of Mesmerism or animal magnetism, or the “spirtuo-sexual magnetism” of O. S. Fowler, a phrenologist with whom Walt Whitman associated, marked the externality of sympathetic currents of connection.<sup>5</sup> So did “neuromimesis” and “nervous mimicry,” terms used by Sir James Paget in 1875 to name that form of involuntary behavior in which a healthy person takes on the symptoms of an organic disease after having viewed or read about them. Athena Vrettos describes how neuromimesis was used to explain the audience reaction to a Sarah Bernhardt performance of *La dame aux camélias* in 1881. As Bernhardt, playing the part of a woman dying of consumption, coughs dramatically, “an epidemic of coughing filled the auditorium, and during several minutes, no one was able to hear the words of the great actress’ . . . Incidents like the Bernhardt performance seemed to reveal a fundamental permeability not only between body and mind but also between self and other.” Neuromimesis, “though in many senses a disease of the imagination,” was not understood as merely a “psychic phenomenon,” for “its ability to shift into the realm of the ‘real’—to produce palpable effects on the body—qualified it for medical attention” (Vrettos 1995, 81–83).<sup>6</sup>

Walt Whitman, I will argue, draws not only from the Smithian tradition of sympathy but also from this more vitalist one, which is more alert to sympathy’s capacity to imprint or act upon the flesh.<sup>7</sup> Whitman was not alone in this. The narrator of Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, for example, describes an affective transfer of “heat” between himself and the scarlet letter as he places it on his breast:

It seemed to me,—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my work,—it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, a sensation of burning heat; as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered, and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor.

Elizabeth Barnes (1997, 7) cites this passage as an example of “fleshly sympathy,” but given the participation of the red cloth in the sympathetic circuit, it could also be described as a textile or material sympathy. My point here is that a sense of sympathy as material force persisted alongside its interiorization and moralization as “sentiment.”<sup>8</sup>

Through awkward, cloudy notions such as fleshly or material sympathy, magnetism, and mimesis, attention in the nineteenth century was drawn to the way sympathy is not only a sentiment but also a *natural force arriving from elsewhere*. That such notions circulated suggests that there persisted something akin to an older, natural

philosophy notion of Sympathy, which Michel Foucault (1970) famously described as part of the episteme of “the prose of the world.” The historian Seth Lobis, in *The Virtue of Sympathy*, describes this as the figure of a more-than-human or natural force of “mobility, communication, and exchange.” Lobis (2015, 4, 312) shows how a sense of the everyday presence of *this* Sympathy—as a mimetic tendency at large among bodies continuously affecting and being affected by each other and by atmospheres—persisted even as sympathy was, via Smith and others,<sup>9</sup> coming to be understood as having the more restricted locus of a moral sentiment within human individuals.<sup>10</sup> Like Lobis, I want to mark the persistence of this “broadly spatial” kind of Sympathy, a protean natural force existing alongside those of magnetism, mimesis, gravity, and repulsion or antipathy. In what follows, I explore the way Whitman creatively discloses this Sympathy in his poetry and prose.

### Five Shapes of Sympathy

Whitman experiments poetically with a variety of shapes<sup>11</sup> of sympathy, a force that expresses “on many frequencies simultaneously—erotic, psychic, political (Klatt 2008, 323). Whitman’s interest in sympathy—as figure of speech and as natural force—is connected to his broader effort to induce in his readers an affective comportment conducive to the democratic culture he idealized.<sup>12</sup> He seems to be pursuing an alchemy (physical, psychological, literary) through which public hostility, anxiety, and vulnerability (connected to slavery, civil war, and their persistent aftermaths) could be transformed into a mood of egalitarian sympathy. What emerges in Whitman, I will suggest, is an enchanting picture of a mimetic and infectious ontological process, a multi-layered (onto)Sympathy operating with different speeds, degrees of specificity, and sites of expression.

Before I attend in detail to the texts in which each shape of Sympathy appears, let me summarize each briefly. Sympathy 1 is the familiar figure of the moral sentiment of pity, but now given a more decidedly *somatic* inflection, such that Christian pity becomes a current of contagious pain. In another shape, Sympathy 4, the affective hallmark will be more pleasurable than painful. There it appears as a current of erotic attraction between bodies, as “mad filaments, ungovernable shoots,”<sup>13</sup> or a “screaming electric”:

Screaming electric, the atmosphere using,

At random glancing, each as I notice absorbing,

Swiftly on, but a little while alighting,

Curious envelop'd messages delivering,

Sparkles hot, seed ethereal down in the dirt dropping.<sup>14</sup>

The bodies caught up in Erotic Sympathy need not be exclusively human, and can include not only the “hot seed” in the lines above but also “sparkles” from a grinding wheel:

The scene, and all its belongings—

how they seize and affect me! . . .

Diffusing, dropping, sideway-darting,

in tiny showers of gold,

Sparkles from the wheel.<sup>15</sup>

When Sympathy appears as either the contagion of pain or the pleasure of erotic touch, it is explicitly felt or sensed by a human body: “I am he attesting sympathy. I have instant conductors all over me.”<sup>16</sup> But Whitman also marks a sympathy operating in the body *below* the level of sensory detection, a sympathy whose agency is as implicit and automatic as that of a lung or heart-valve. This is Sympathy 2, Body-Part.

In Sympathy 3, which I call Nature's Acceptance, the locus of affectivity is not a human self but the extremely diverse, composite body of a creative Nature. Here, Sympathy shows not as one person's partiality for another's painful or erotic allure, but as Nature's wholesome acceptance of all that is. This Nature is a magnanimous mother earth. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that Whitman also engages a shape of Sympathy that, while still earthy, is *not* benevolent. In Sympathy 5, Gravitational Pull, we encounter a natural force that is *radically* impartial—to the point where there is no particular bias in favor of humanity. This last shape is the geological or cosmological set of attractions with the disturbing indifference of the pull of gravity. In this haunting line from “Song of Myself,” we can hear Whitman trying to combine both the allure and the indifference of this Sympathy: “The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections, They scorn the best I can do to relate them.” It is at this point, I will argue, that we see Whitman (involuntarily?) pushing the notion of “sympathy” to its limits, pushing it out of the implicit framework of benevolence in which it has historically been at home (perhaps most notably in the Renaissance cosmologies of the “prose of the world”). Whitman here begins to discern a sympathy that is unmoored from divine Creation and a providential metaphysics.<sup>17</sup> I turn now to a more careful examination of each of the shapes of Whitman's sympathy.

## Sympathy I: Contagious Pain

How does Whitman pull a sentimental notion of sympathy, organized around pity for human suffering and the exemplar of the Christian Incarnation, in a less moralized, more sensuous direction? He does this through a rhetoric of bodily contagion or possession. Writing as a public advocate in the 1840s for the abolishment of the death penalty, we find Whitman responding to charges of his womanly “sentimentalism” and “mawkish sympathy” by endorsing them—by, that is, invoking the Savior's own “weakness” for the pitiful creature man:

who are we to pity . . . if not those most pitiable of all our fellow creatures—the doers of great crimes? . . . [F]orget not that the same God who made us, made them—and that his sunshine and blessings come alike to them as to us. If it be “mawkish sympathy” to think so, then was the great expiator of sin the weakest and wildest visionary of us all!<sup>18</sup>

But by the time of “Song of Myself,” we meet an I who, though still imitating Christ's love for the poor and weak, is now presented less as performing a voluntary act of pity than as being “possess'd” by the pains of prisoners, invalids, and paupers:

. . . I am possess'd!

Embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering,

See myself in prison shaped like another man,

And feel the dull unintermittent pain.

For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and keep watch,

It is I let out in the morning and barr'd at night.

Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd to him and walk by his side,

(I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat on my twitching lips.)

Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried and sentenced.

Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last gasp,

My face is ash-color'd, my sinews gnarl, away from me people retreat.

Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,

I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg.

Whitman's *I*, possessed by myriad others, is a body touched and infected by a painful suffering arriving from abroad. And if Adam Smith granted only an "as it were" entrance into the experience of another, and if a philosophical tradition following from Smith has come to theorize sympathy as a matter of "projecting" one's own sentiments onto others in an act of "imaginative identification,"<sup>19</sup> Whitman here lays claim to a much less self-enclosed process of transmission. Clearly, Whitman's poetry involves acts of reader imagination, but for him, the phenomenology of sympathy proceeds not by a logic of projection so much as by *dilation*, or the opening wider of the pores of the body so as to receive more of the outside. He presents the pain of the other as an atmospheric current that jumps across space to connect bodies, in this case causing his lips to "twitch" and his "sinews" to "gnarl." Elsewhere, in a highly edited passage in a notebook, Whitman explicitly rejects—crosses out—the "as it were" status of sympathy in favor of an image of it as a physical "wave" or "flood":

Sometimes there come to one's a man's or woman's heart, and fill <sup>and radiate</sup> ~~one~~ **as it were** him or her from head to foot, such waves, floods of <sup>abstract-mortal</sup> sympathy love, for our humankind.<sup>20</sup>

In such cases as these, we see Whitman gently inflecting the moral sentimentalism of his time toward an older, more bodily definition of sympathy as a physics or network of affinities between natural bodies.

In another anti-gallows editorial, where Whitman calls upon readers of the *Brooklyn Eagle* to sympathize with both the victims *and* the perpetrators of crimes, he again takes care *not* to present sympathy as exclusively a function of a self-contained individual's imaginative reconstruction of another's pain. Instead, the pain itself, as a kind of vital force, appears as actually traversing from one body to another, perhaps in the way that electrical impulses pass along messages on the telegraph.<sup>21</sup> In "Our Answer to a Reasonable Question," there are two instances of this relay of suffering. In the first, the suffering of the (imprisoned) murderer infects, saddens, and ultimately chastises those who call for his death ("Good God! We are almost shocked at our own cruelty!"); in the second, the suffering of the murdered victim infects, agonizes, and, presumably, begins to redeem the murderer.

Is it not enough that a fellow being . . . however black his crimes, . . . should be dragged away from the presence and communion of his kind, condemned to painful servile labor, dressed in the badges of degradation, his mouth deprived of its loved office of speech, his ears never more to hear the accents of kindness, respect or approbation kept from the

blessed sunshine or free air and when night comes, to be shut in alone with darkness and silence and the phantoms of his past crimes for his only companion? . . . Good God! We are almost shocked at our own cruelty! . . . Looking only at the criminal in connection with the great outrage through which we know him, we forget that he is still a duplicate of the humanity that stays in us all. He may be seared in vice, but if we could stand invisible by him in prison and look into his soul, how often during those terrible nights might we not see agony compared to which the pains of the slain are but a passing sigh! (Whitman 1920, 106–107; see also Jones 2009).<sup>22</sup>

Whitman here makes a rhetorical move typical of sentimental narratives: he asserts an inalienable "humanity" that is "duplicated" across criminal, victim, and moralist alike. To *be* human is to have a natural susceptibility to being painfully affected by the suffering of others. Sentimental narratives have been criticized for the way their proclamation of a *universal* humanity across apparent differences nevertheless locates the (white, middle-class) sympathizer in a position of social superiority, as an active subject facing the passive object of her pity. (Or, to be more precise, the only activeness allowed the slave, the inebriate, the immigrant, the pauper, the criminal is their emission of provocative signs of their suffering.) In the quotation above, however, Whitman adds a twist to that narrative: he places the criminal too in the position of sympathizer. Neuromimesis is such that even the *agent* of harm ("the criminal"), after having witnessed or recalled the pain of his victim, will be afflicted, via a kind of unwilling contagion, by the victim's own "agony." And even if that experience of another's pain is at first vicarious, it will instantly be translated by the sympathetic body into a firsthand pain.

Whitman does acknowledge that bodily susceptibility to sympathetic pain faces competition from other bodily tendencies—there is, for example, also a leaning in the human body toward the pleasure of vengeance. Referring to a Rochester newspaper's "bloodthirsty" call for a hung man's body to be "buried like the carcass of a dog, far away from the honored dead," Whitman admits but also objects to ("Pah!") this allure of vengeance:

It is very likely that notions of the kind we are now giving utterance to, will be scouted by not a few as puerile as the fruit of "mawkish sympathy." This is the stale cant of the day. It is considered a very manly thing to press with ferocity every advantage which the arrayed potency of the law can give against one frail, quivering wretch (it is somewhat new, however, to carry that ferocity out upon the dead earth of his body!) but your conservator, of "justice," feels it horrible and blasphemous, and dangerous to the land, to utter one word of sympathy and pity for him whom society has thrust out from it. Pah!<sup>23</sup>

And in the notebook entry already cited (with reference to Whitman's crossing out of the "as it were"), Whitman qualifies his faith in the forcefulness of Sympathy: "Most people," he writes, will turn away from feelings of sympathy with "weariness, or vacancy, or perhaps a curl of the lip."<sup>24</sup> Whitman still affirms the natural spontaneity of a mimetic susceptibility, a sensitivity intrinsic to a live and porous body, but acknowledges that this may not register consciously *as* sympathy to the same extent in every body at every time. The propensity toward affection or affectivity is not uncontested: "love" or sympathy is the soul's "north latitude," but "Pride" is its "south latitude,"<sup>25</sup> an idea repeated in the "Preface" to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride . . ."

That Sympathy can be countermanded or overwhelmed by pride, fatigue, distraction, or disgust is also acknowledged by Sandra Bartky, writing a century later about the feminist solidarity she seeks to build. Sympathy, she writes, can all too easily be blocked by "culturally entrenched figurations of despised, different others" and by "the anxious fear" that to acknowledge widespread human suffering would plunge one "into the abyss that has claimed so many others" (Bartky 1997, 193). One can read Whitman's poetry as an attempt to dilute the "anxious fear" of difference by producing in his readers a stronger awareness of their underlying participation in or affective entanglement ("Sympathy") with it. He claimed, for example, that even though his anti-gallows writings failed to achieve legislative abolition, they nevertheless "increased sensitivity on the part of the public toward any useless harshness in the treatment of criminals," and "the real good resulting out of the opposition . . . was [in] diffusing more benevolence and sympathy . . ., elevating the range of temper and feeling . . ." (Whitman 1921, 15).<sup>26</sup> Sympathy does not always carry the day: as an element within a complex affective *ecology*, it confronts, triggers, and comingles with other, complicating sentiments, memories, and forces. But the "greatest poet" can work with these multiple forces so that "neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other."<sup>27</sup> I will return to the "how" of Whitman's attempt to induce a sensibility alive to Sympathy at the end of the essay.

## Sympathy 2: Body-Part

Whitman's invocations of Sympathy as being "possess'd" by another's suffering and being struck by a feeling of pain exist alongside an attempt to mark a Sympathy almost completely below the radar of emotional or even sensory detection. In what Michael Moon describes as the "remarkable anatomical inventory" at

the end of "I Sing the Body Electric,"<sup>28</sup> "sympathies" appear not as sentiments but as body-parts or biological organs, and they operate as silently as an "elbow-socket" and as unnoticeably as a "heart-valve" or "lung-sponge":

Upper-arm, arm-pit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews,  
arm-bones,

Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, fore-  
finger, finger-balls, finger-joints, finger-nails,

...

All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or  
your body or

of any one's body, male or female,

The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and  
clean,

The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,

Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity  
...<sup>29</sup>

That inventory was added to the poem in 1856. Some years earlier, in the "Talbot Wilson" notebook entry, Whitman had tried out a more dramatic version of sympathy as a biological shape, a sympathy that is an unborn fetus lodged in an autopsied brain:

Among murderers and cannibals and traders in slaves

Stopped my spirit with light feet, and pried among their  
heads and made fissures to look through

And there saw folded foetuses of twins [ . . . ]

Mute with bent necks, waiting to be born.—

And one was Sympathy and one was truth.<sup>30</sup>

Through the rather gruesome image of entwined and "folded" foetuses, exposed to view by a hole drilled in the skull, Whitman seems to be trying to mark a universal, even if buried, physical susceptibility to other bodies, a sympathy that makes a difference even if it is not itself discerned and, surely, not always controlling: Sympathy as *well-spring*. In "Poem of Women" (1856), Whitman again speaks of the enfolded quality of sympathy, this time explicitly gendered female:

Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes  
unfolded . . .

Unfolded out of the justice of the woman all justice is unfolded,

Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy . . .<sup>31</sup>

Sympathy is embedded or stowed away within the human body, amid its other organs and their animal functions.<sup>32</sup> The idea of sympathy as body-part may have been influenced by Whitman's flirtation with phrenology, in particular that of the Fowler brothers.<sup>33</sup> "By the middle of the nineteenth century, phrenology held a place in the American mind not unlike that occupied by psychiatry in the 1930's. Its terminology and tenets entered the language of daily conversation" (Colbert 1997, 23). And Whitman himself had a phrenological exam in 1849, in which he scored a 6 out of 7 on "Amativeness" and "Adhesiveness." The report concludes that Whitman's "leading traits of character appear to be Friendship, Sympathy, Sublimity and Self-Esteem" (Loving 2000, 150).<sup>34</sup> "Adhesiveness" several times appears in his poems, as do "Amativeness" and "Alimentiveness," terms among the forty-two "faculties" located on different places on the skull in a drawing of "The Phrenological Head" that appears in O. S. Fowler's *The Practical Phrenologist*.<sup>35</sup> Fowler (1849, 155) also describes "sympathy" as a "moral organ" that occupies "the most prominent portion of the head, and the greatest surface."<sup>36</sup> Compared with Sympathy as contagious pain, Sympathy as body-part is not overtly Christ-like. But God the Father does enter the scene via phrenology, which grounds its claims about correspondences between the internal shapes of moral character and the external shapes of the body (especially cranial contours) in the *divine design* of the human body.

### Sympathy 3: Nature's Acceptance

We have seen how for Whitman, Sympathy is more than the sentiment of an individual. It is an active force, current, or thread linking bodies and allowing contagion between them. This contagion or infection is not always symmetrical—not always an exchange of equal degrees of power or intensity—but it is always *interactive*. We can see Whitman extending the agency of Sympathy beyond even the *inter-human*, in an early story called "One Wicked Impulse." There, one of the nodes of the sympathetic pulse is not a human being at all but the plants and waters and heat and light of Nature. Philip, who killed the lawyer who cheated him and his sister out of their inheritance and sexually assaulted her, is acquitted of the crime but remains plagued by guilt. Until one day when he awakens to find himself calmed by the "gleam of the Hudson river," the "flowers, grass . . . , and

noble trees." He experiences an unconditional acceptance:

As Philip gazed, the holy calming power of Nature—the invisible spirit of so much beauty and so much innocence, melted into his soul . . . No accusing frowns show'd in the face of the flowers, or in the green shrubs, or the branches of the trees . . . Involuntarily, he bent over a branch of red roses, and took them softly between his hands—those murderous, bloody hands! But the red roses neither wither'd nor smell'd less fragrant. And as the young man kiss'd them, and dropp'd a tear upon them, it seem'd to him that he had found pity and sympathy from Heaven itself.<sup>37</sup>

What I want to highlight in this story is the appearance of a shape of Sympathy that is not an exchange between humans but between a man and nonhuman bodies. Nature infects Philip with what Whitman elsewhere calls "the universal and affectionate Yes of the earth,"<sup>38</sup> and Philip responds with his saliva and tears. Notable also is that when the bounds of the encounter spill out beyond the human, we can better imagine a Sympathy not so tightly bound to pity. For it is not quite accurate to say that the shrubs, trees, roses, and Hudson river feel sorry for or feel Christian charity toward Philip's suffering; rather they (amorally) take him aboard, accept him without judgment, as a body not in need of pity or pardon. Nature, in the words of "By Blue Ontario's Shore," "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing." This solar judgment is open-armed, impartial, elemental, a nonchalant acceptance, like that of the magnanimous Earth in "A Song of Rolling Earth" who/which "makes no discriminations, . . . refuses nothing, shuts none out"—and "is not pathetic" or full of pity.<sup>39</sup> "The profound lesson of reception" is to respond neither with "preference nor denial."<sup>40</sup> A similar departure from a person-centric moralism is in evidence in a passage from the 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*, where Whitman, after assigning to the poet the task of forming the "consistence of what is to be from what has been and is,"<sup>41</sup> insists that in so doing the poet "does not moralize or make applications of morals."<sup>42</sup> The poet instead impersonates the divinely nonjudgmental nature of the rays of the sun.

We can again witness Whitman's shift from Sympathy as moral sentiment to a more naturalistic, not-exclusively-human kind of affectivity when we trace the evolution of Whitman's use of the phrase "a curious kind of sympathy." A variant of the already mentioned "strange indescribable sympathy with all suffering, crime, ignorance, deformity,"<sup>43</sup> the phrase "a curious kind of sympathy" appears at least three times in Whitman's writings. In an 1846 editorial for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, it refers to brotherly and sisterly love:

There exists a curious kind of sympathy . . . that arises in the mind of a newspaper conductor with the public he serves. He gets to *love* them. Daily communion creates a sort of brotherhood and sisterhood between the two parties.

By 1860, when the phrase appears in the poem “Enfans d’Adam” (section 3), the site of this “curious sympathy” has migrated from the human “mind” to the “hand” and the “naked meat” of bodies:

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of the parts of you . . .

Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,

Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eye-brows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,

Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,

Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,

Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue, . . .

The curious sympathy one feels, when feeling with the hand the naked meat of his own body, or another person’s body . . .

That last line re-appears, finally, in the 1891–1892 edition of “I Sing the Body Electric.” And this time, “the naked meat of his own body, or another person’s body” has been replaced by the more abstract and impersonal “the body”: “The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the body. The circling rivers, the breath, and breathing it in and out.” Sympathy is now like a circuit of water, breath, or electricity passing between bodies, and the scene of its operation includes much more than the sentimental self of compassion.

Giuseppe Nori (1995, 3–28) has argued that Adam Smith’s treatment of sympathy broadened the range of its operation from the narrow confines of pity to include

fellow-feeling with any passion whatever . . . Through imaginative projection, the self was able to experience a loss and a fusion of identify at the same time. This process of identification rested on the power of the sympathetic self, exactly because that self enclosed the potential for its own psychological effacement into the other.

Whitman, I argue, expands the scope of sympathy even further, beyond the boundaries of the self, beyond “imaginative projection” or “psychological identification.” The mode of relationality Whitman highlights with Nature’s

Acceptance cannot be described through those notions: both because it is more bodily and material, and because the parties to the relation include not just people but also places and things.

#### Sympathy 4: Erotic

In the first shape of Sympathy discussed, what is transmitting across and into bodies is *pain*, or what Gilles Deleuze might call a “sad passion,” that is, one that tends to diminish a body’s capacity for action.<sup>44</sup> With Nature’s Impartiality, the affective tone of Sympathy shifts from sadness to “calmness.” And in this next shape, it becomes sexual excitement and ecstatic pleasure. The following lines from “Song of Myself” provide a good example of this Erotic Sympathy:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,

The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer . . .

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it,

Translucent mould of me it shall be you!

Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!

Firm masculine colter it shall be you!

. . .

Sun so generous it shall be you!

Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!

You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!

Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!

Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving loungeer in my winding paths, it shall be you!

As with Nature’s Acceptance, the play of Erotic Sympathy is not restricted to human bodies but includes attractions between, and cominglings of, a man, a “shaded ledge,” “sun,” “vapors,” “muscular fields,” and “branches of live oak.” (While Whitman may have used these terms as not-so-veiled metaphors for parts of another man’s body, his poetry nevertheless continually blurs the line between metaphor and animism.) One distinctive feature of Erotic Sympathy is its drive toward what a line from the 1855 version of “Song of Myself” names as “the merge.” Sympathy

is here “erotic” in the sense of Freud’s (1961, 77) definition of eros as the “instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units.” Whereas in the other figures of Whitmanian Sympathy, bodies (more or less) retain their discreteness even as they affect and are affected by each other, Erotic Sympathy posits a full-on merge or thrilling dissolution of individuality. “O adhesiveness! O the pensive aching to be together—you know not why, and I know not why.”<sup>45</sup> Like cream stirred into coffee, fluids, and flesh comingle past the point of disaggregation.<sup>46</sup>

There is a rich body of recent scholarship exploring the political import of the eroticism of Whitman’s poetry. To name just few: M. Jimmie Killingsworth (1989, xvii) says that the sensuous poems assert “the primacy of physical life as a moral force: From the body spring human sympathy, which defies the corruption of social institutions like slavery and prostitution and which justifies indulgence of . . . instincts of sex and procreation”; David S. Reynolds locates Whitman’s eroticism within the context of antebellum debates about “free love”<sup>47</sup>; Michael Moon (1993, 13) reads it as an attempt to work out the complicated relationship between homoerotic desire and “American practical life”; James Martel (2010, 625–58) says eroticism was for Whitman “a political endeavor, a sphere in which . . . a non-specific collective love . . . constitutes the public itself”<sup>48</sup>; to Jason Frank (2011, 155–85), Whitman offers cruising as a model of citizenship appropriate to the urbanizing, multicultural demos.

What I would add is that Whitman’s eroticism is linked to his disclosure of Sympathy as a kind of vital force or current of affectivity that infuses and exceeds specifically human experience, a force of attraction *so* promiscuous that it ignores species boundaries. Sympathy can manifest as an erotic attraction between a human foot and the mineral earth, as in “The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections.”<sup>49</sup> Or as the “hankering” of a man for his food: “Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude; How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?”<sup>50</sup> And sometimes it does not require a human at all, insofar as it is a tendency of “matter” per se: “Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract all matter? So the body of me to all I meet or know.”<sup>51</sup> In likening an erotic “aching” for other bodies to the force of gravity upon a planet,<sup>52</sup> Whitman takes a step back from the anthropocentrism latent in those “I”s in the poems—and which is stated outright in “Song of Joys”: “O the joy of that vast elemental sympathy which only the human soul is capable of generating and emitting in steady and limitless floods.”<sup>53</sup> As the man-to-man or homoerotic current merges into a larger ocean of Sympathetic affections and contagions, “affects are no longer sentiments” but “go beyond the strength of those who undergo them” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164).

## Sympathy 5: Gravitational Pull

In each of the four shapes of sympathy already discussed, there circulates something of the divine: the divine magnanimity of Christ’s incarnation infuses Sympathy 1, the divine design of the phrenological body hovers in the background of Sympathy 2, the “holy calming power” of Creation marks Sympathy 3, and the erotic bodies of Sympathy 4 make “divine” whatever they touch or are touch’d from. What is more, in many of the passages where the word “sympathy” or its synonyms appear, Whitman names “soul” as its receptacle or vehicle (or both): the anti-gallows editorials ask the reader to look into the soul of the criminal; the notebook entry titled “Sympathy” says that the “Soul goes forth with such yearning for all Humanity—such pensive anguish”; in “One Wicked Impulse,” it is Philip’s soul that is suffused with the nonjudgmental embrace of Nature. These recurrent invocations of the divine and the soul suggest that the Sympathies Whitman sings reverberate within a cosmic order that proceeds to the good of humanity. It is true that Whitman was not a conventional Christian: he was wary of churches (preferring the aroma of armpits to prayer), and Nature was for him more creative process than pre-conceived design.<sup>54</sup> Whitman often speaks as if the force of Sympathy tends in the direction of human happiness: “We know that *sympathy or love* is the law over all laws because nothing else but love is the soul conscious of pure happiness, which appears to be the ultimate resting place and point of all things.”<sup>55</sup>

But this very assumption is put under pressure when Whitman stumbles upon an affinity between sympathy and gravity, asking “Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract all matter? So the body of me to all I meet or know.” It seems likely that in these lines Whitman was seeking to mark the profound, ontological *depth* of sympathy: that “old, eternal, yet ever-new” quality of adhesiveness.<sup>56</sup> For in a society riven by racial and regional hatreds and violence, it was, Whitman believed, the special vocation of the poet to sing this underground current, to tap into it and channel it, as a kite does for lightning. But in invoking a sympathy operative with the impersonal, geo-logic of gravity, Whitman also found himself face to face with an affectivity that was not only *not limited to* humans but also *not predisposed toward* them. And “gravitational” Sympathy does trouble the presumed link between Sympathy and positive ethical effect: it raises the possibility that Sympathy’s persistent (even if not always overt) presence is morally indeterminate. After all, beyond a certain point, gravity is impervious to human effort (“legislatures cannot alter it”<sup>57</sup>) and its impartiality is radical (“Does the light or heat pick out? Does the attraction of gravity pick out?”<sup>58</sup>). Unlike the impartial but beneficial acceptance of mother Nature,



the “impartiality” of the gravitational earth is haunted by the specter of unconcern. It does not discriminate in favor of abolitionism, the extension of democratic rights, or moral improvement.<sup>59</sup>

Whitman thus confronts a Sympathy that is both embedded in our very bodies and not providential. This difficult and uncomfortable thought does not or need not render futile all attempts to harness the forces of sympathy to political and ethical projects. But in the absence of an anthropocentric bias to the universe, a cautious, experimental, even poetic, approach to the micropolitics of public affects would be advised.

## Doting

I have tried to highlight how, in each of Whitman’s five shapes of Sympathy (as painful contagion, body-part, impartial acceptance, erotic attraction, and gravitational pull), we find preserved a non-modern sense of Sympathy as a natural or vital force operating below, through, and beyond human bodies or experience. Let me conclude by returning to the question of how one might deliberately channel or harness this (onto)Sympathy for reformist or other political projects. Whitman did not believe that sympathy would be sufficient to address the inequalities and injustices of his day, but there is nonetheless, he thought, real political work it could do.<sup>60</sup> One of the techniques—both literary and practical—that Whitman himself used was “doting” or paying slow attention to ordinary objects, things, shapes, words, bodies. This is what the “child” in the following poem does: its attentiveness to “the early lilacs,” “the mire of the pond-side,” the “odor” of mother, “the furniture,” “the light falling on roofs,” and “the heavy plank’d wharves” spawns an “affection that will not be gainsay’d.”

There was a child went forth every day,

And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became,

And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day,

Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

Harold Aspiz (1998) associates Whitman’s attentiveness with phrenology: “Coincidentally or not, the poem illustrates the phrenological formula for educating the superior child by cultivating its powers of observing all surrounding phenomena.” Perhaps. But Whitman also seems to be counting on what Deleuze and Guattari (1986; cited in Clark 2008, 33–44) call the “little detail that starts to swell and carries you off. Anything at all can do the job, but it always turns out to be a political affair.” Tim Clark (2008, 39) links this claim to Deleuze’s own

project of sympathy: “it is the impersonality of the little detail that provokes the extension of a sympathy, the stretching of a passion beyond a given identitarian boundary.”

A second Whitmanian example of doting appears in section 8 of “Song of Myself,” where the affecting objects include the “little one” who “sleeps in its cradle,” the “blab of the pave,” the “sluff of boot-soles,” and the “suicide” who “sprawls on the bloody floor.”<sup>61</sup> In doting on such things, Whitman encourages the reader to slow down and notice these bits and pieces, and to be touched by what one shares with them or how one is resonating with them. Even when such resemblances are felt only vaguely or darkly, they nevertheless make a mark on the receiver, a mark that becomes more palpable and more powerful through the *repeated practice* of doting. The aim of doting, then, is to find oneself more present to surroundings and more attuned to one’s entanglements. Doting involves one’s “own” imagination, yes, but it is an intrinsically porous imagination modestly working upon that which has ingressed from elsewhere.

Whitman speaks explicitly of doting in these lines from “Song of Myself”:

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious,

Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy,

I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,

Nor the cause of the friendship I emit, nor the cause of the friendship I take again.

That I walk up my stoop, I pause to consider if it really be,

A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books.<sup>62</sup>

It is again noteworthy that the site of doting, while named as “myself,” extends through Whitman’s ankles and wishes to “each moment and whatever happens,” to the front steps, and to the ordinary morning-glory. Doting on each reveals a “friendship” subsisting across different kinds of bodies, a point Whitman made to himself in this note: “Put in my poems America things, idioms, materials, persons, groups, minerals, vegetables, animals, etc.”<sup>63</sup> Whitman’s use of catalogues is itself a practice of doting upon an outside: the lists with their creative juxtapositions of items prime the reader’s receptivity to the startlingly vital presence of every thing.

In 1902, Edmond Holmes, speaking with a strong transcendentalist accent, wrote of the way Whitman transfers the “glory, the splendour, the divinity, which we instinctively ascribe to the ideal” to “every detail of the actual. Frankest

and most consistent of Pantheists, he deifies Nature, not in her totality, . . . but in all the minutiae of her phenomenal existence” (Holmes 1902a). In 1990, George Kateb (2011, 31) described this as Whitman’s attempt to alert us to “the beauty that any person or thing has just by being there, or has just by force of wanting to be looked at rather than turned away from.” Today, we might say that in doting Whitman offers a strategy of “slow sensing,” which can join forces with the “slow” movements concerning food and finance.<sup>64</sup>

Whitman’s literary experimentations with Sympathy present a world populated by porous and infectious bodies traversed by wayward proto-affections, rather than by self-possessed selves bearing moral sentiments. Engaging Whitman’s own poetic experimentations has helped me to form a concept of sympathy that is more than a dynamic of “identification” between two or more (aspirationally) sovereign individuals. That narrower notion of sympathy is in fact the one most often criticized by political theorists as an essentially private and apolitical sentiment. Hannah Arendt, for example, says in *On Revolution* that because sympathy (as compassion) “abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters . . . are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.” But one can be sympathetic to objections to sentimental sympathy without agreeing to confine sympathy to that one manifestation of it. To confine it that way would be to prevent any reckoning with Sympathy as an *underdetermined vital force* out and about. How is it, amid the ubiquity of differences large and small, amid so many and varied configurations of bodies, fortunes, desires, powers, and advantages, that partial connections and connective partialities arise at all? Whitman helps us to discern more actively this tendency toward tending, and to articulate a trans-individual model of receptivity, affectivity, and sociality.

### Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Steven Johnston for the invitation to give the Maxwell Lecture in Political Theory, and for the privilege of the response-lectures by Romand Coles and Cristin Ellis. Thanks are also due to Emily Crandall, Susan Buck-Morss, and the other members of the CUNY Graduate Center Political Theory Workshop, and to William Connolly, Nathan Gies, Anatoli Ignatov, Mort Schoolman, Chad Shomura, and the three anonymous reviewers of the essay for *Political Research Quarterly*.

### Author’s Note

This essay is an expanded version of a public lecture given at the University of Utah in October 2015.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. See Elizabeth Barnes (1997, 3):

In American literature . . . sympathetic identification takes on a particular political significance. In writing spanning nearly a hundred years, and including authors as diverse as Tom Paine and Harriet Beecher Stowe, sympathy—expressed as emotional, psychological, or biological attachment—is represented as the basis of democracy, and therefore as fundamental to the creation of a distinctly “American” character.

2. Also,

In the long, dark struggle with national injustice, through which I have been called to pass, I have been cheered and strengthened by the knowledge of the reformatory change which has taken place in the sentiments of thousands, through . . . the Liberator,” which has “enlarge[d] the spirit of human sympathy” (Garrison 1852, 181).

3. Whitman’s (1984) notebooks contain several references to Rousseau. According to Bliss Perry (1906, 266), “Whitman’s religion resembles the sentimental Deism of the eighteenth century, as exemplified in the famous Savoyard Vicar of Rousseau.”
4. Like sentiment, “imagination” exists at the intersection of mind and body: it is, as Kant will say, a “faculty” or power or capacity in but not quite of the body.
5. According to Charles Colbert (1997, 295), Fowler’s “spirito-sexual magnetism” was a force “that circulated not only through the individual bodies of the engendering pair but also between them as the spark that ignited their love.”
6. Gordon (2011, 78 and 77) contrasts the sentimentalist sympathy of Stowe with the model of “physical sympathy” that he and Baldwin detect as the aim of Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro.” See also Gibbs (2008, 135), who uses the related notion of the “corporeal unconscious” which “is animated by sympathy, a putative affinity between certain things—including bodies and organs—which makes them liable not only to be similarly affected by the same influence, but more especially to affect or influence one another.”
7. This “flesh” is, for Whitman (2002, “I Sing the Body Electric,” section 1), the *same as* the soul: “And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?” D. H. Lawrence ([1923] 1977, 180) highlights Whitman’s somocentrism: “‘There!’ [Whitman] said to the soul. ‘Stay there!’ Stay there. Stay in the flesh. Stay in the limbs and lips and in the belly. Stay in the breast and womb. Stay there, o soul, where you belong.”
8. In *The Letters of the British Spy*, a book whose popularity in America prompted ten editions by 1835, William Wirt offers a description of sympathy that captures both its moral and material dimensions: by “SYMPATHY . . . I

mean not merely that tender passion which quavers the lip and fills the eye” at the sight of “the sorrows and tears of another” but also “that still more delicate and subtle quality by which we passively catch the very colours, momentum and strength” of the one to whom we are attending. (Wirt 1802, 10)

9. Sharon Krause (2008, 79), in her fascinating account of the role of sympathy in relation to the practice of impartiality, shows how for Hume sympathy

“is not primarily a disposition or a virtue but rather a faculty of the mind with an informational function, much like imagination or memory. Like them, it operates automatically within consciousness not simply as the result of individual will or character.”

10. In contrast to the historical narrative according to which Sympathy as a principle of “communication” in Nature gradually became “a matter of moral, social, and psychological experience,” Lobis (2015, 32) shows that even “as sympathy was increasingly conceived in human terms, it remained significantly in contract with natural and magical traditions.”
11. A “shape” is a Whitmanian term of art by which he marks a formation whose capacity for ongoing transformation is relatively high, at least compared with that of the more stable “entity.” For a discussion of this term, see Bennett (2015).
12. See Morton Schoolman (unpublished manuscript).
13. Walt Whitman (2002), “I Sing the Body Electric,” section 5.
14. Walt Whitman (2002), “So Long!” lines 36–40.
15. Walt Whitman (2002), “Sparkles from the Wheel.”
16. Walt Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” line 615.
17. One next step might be to begin to inhabit what Steven Johnston calls a “tragic sensibility” that faces “the arbitrary, fragile aspects of social and political existence” as “permanent features of life.” This need not result, says Johnston (2015, 3), in “political resignation, a docile acceptance of damnable results,” but can “foster new bursts of innovation that previously escaped the imagination.”
18. Whitman in an 1846 editorial, cited in Paul Christian Jones (2011, 109). Jones continues:

In an 1847 article, he answers the charges that sympathy for executed criminals is . . . “foolish weakness, only fit for women and children,” by contending that “nearly all that is good and pure in the world—in law, government, human action, and other departments of life—proceeds from the impulses of this ‘sentimentality,’” which he attributes to “the divine emanation of CHRIST’S purity and gentleness.”

D. H. Lawrence found Whitman’s equation of sympathy with “Jesus’s LOVE, and with Paul’s CHARITY” to be Whitman’s big mistake, “The mistake of his interpretation of his watchword: Sympathy.” Lawrence prefers Whitman’s experimentation with a sympathy of “the Open Road,” a sympathy freed from religion, contingent upon circumstance, and subject only to the morality of the individual of “the soul judging for herself” (Lawrence [1923]

1977, 182, 185).

19. “To understand sympathy” in the sentimentalist tradition, writes Susan Toth Lord (2013, 90), “one must focus on the collaborative relationship between the author, who creates imagined selves, and audience members, who project their sentiments onto these selves, thereby transforming them into familiar beings.” The “as it were” quality of sympathy’s connection between bodies persists throughout the thoughtful essays of that collection.
20. Whitman (1984), “Sympathy,” in *Notebooks*, vol. III, 963.
21. Klatt argues that Whitman was fascinated by the 1857 construction of the first transatlantic cable, and aspired for his poetry to induce a sympathy with the telegraph’s ability to communicate swiftly and almost immediately across spatial distance (Klatt 2008, 321–31).
22. For Jones (2009, 2), “This acknowledgement of the humanity of the criminal, the awareness of his pain, and the move toward a sympathetic understanding of his plight are striking aspects of Whitman’s writing about specific criminals as well.” See Jones’s (2011) *Against the Gallows*, chapter 2, note 5 for a good discussion of the scholarly debates on Whitman’s editorials.
23. Whitman, “Orthodox but Sanguinary,” September 9, 1846, in *Gathering of the Forces*, 101–03.
24. Whitman (1984), “Sympathy,” in *Notebooks*, vol. III, 963.
25. Whitman (1984), *Notebooks*, vol. I, 131.
26. I take this point from Jones’s (2009, 2) discussion of Whitman’s “Capital punishment”:

Whitman asserted that reformers did achieve “an increased sensitiveness on the part of the public, toward any useless harshness in the treatment of criminals” and “diffus[ed] more benevolence and sympathy through the public mind, elevating the range of temper and feeling, and reacting in a hundred different modes, indirectly upon the popular taste, and upon criminal law, the doings of courts and Juries, and the management of prisons.”

A temperament especially sensitive to the vibrations of suffering emanating from other bodies is what Emma Goldman will later describe as the characteristic mark of the *attentater* or revolutionist committing an act of political violence. The *attentater*, she writes in the context of the 1901 assassination attempt on President McKinley, is so “high-strung, like a violin string” that his or her “deep sympathy with human suffering” impels each to “close the chapter of their lives with a violent outbreak against our system.” “In a desperate moment, the string breaks . . . Such is the psychology of political violence.” (Goldman 2016).

27. Whitman (2002), “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass* 1855, lines 296–323.
28. Michael Moon, in *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (Whitman 2002, 81, note 4).
29. Sherry Ceniza’s (1998), draws attention to Whitman’s association of sympathy with “attitude.” See especially her discussion of Pauline Wright Davis, 134–36.
30. Whitman (1984), “Talbot Wilson,” in *Notebooks*, vol. I, 73.
31. Whitman, “Poem of Women,” lines 8–10. See also Catherine Keller (2014), the chapter on Whitman and the fold.

32. Massumi (2014, 81–83) offers a version of “animal sympathy” that he distinguishes from sentimental or empathetic sympathy.
33. For a succinct account of Whitman’s relationship to the Fowler brothers, see Madeleine Stern (1998).
34. Loving notes also that

although in the *Eagle* of 1846 [Whitman] had criticized Orson S. Fowler’s lecture on the pseudoscience as a “conglomeration of pretension and absurdity,” he revised his opinion in the next year, saying . . . “there can be no harm, but probably much good, in pursuing” its study.

35. “The following lines from Walt Whitman [the “Preface” to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*], for example, are best read with a phrenological chart nearby: ‘Extreme caution or prudence, the soundest organic health, large hope and comparison and fondness for women and children, large alimentiveness and destructiveness and causality, with a perfect sense of the oneness of nature and propriety of the same spirit applied to human affairs . . . these are called up of the float of the brain of the world to be parts of the greatest poet . . .’” (Colbert 1997, 23)
36. The discussion of “sympathy, compassion, kindness, fellow-feeling” appears in chapter 19, on the “faculty” of Benevolence.
37. Walt Whitman, “One Wicked Impulse!” in *Complete Prose Works*, David McCay Publisher, 1892, 348–9. Accessed at <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/other/CompleteProse.html#leaf175v1>
38. Whitman (1984), “Talbot Wilson,” *Notebooks*, vol. I, 64. Although sometimes compared with Thoreau, Whitman typically does not linger very long with the plants and non-human animals: “I walk forth amid the calmness of grass and foliage/But after a little time I will return among men” (The Scope of Government,” *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 292).
39. Whitman (2002), “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” lines 31–35.
40. Whitman (2002), “Song of the Open Road,” line 18.
41. Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” lines 306–7.
42. Whitman (2002), “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass* 1855, lines 318–19.
43. Whitman (1984), “Sympathy,” in *Notebooks*, vol. III, 963.
44. These are in contrast to the joyful passions that energize a body’s power of acting, in expanding assemblages with others. Deleuze’s (1988, 26) discussion of “sad passions” might be developed into an ethical critique of sentimental sympathy:

Spinoza traces, step by step, the dreadful concatenation of sad passions; first, sadness itself, then hatred, aversion, mockery, fear, despair, *morsus conscientiae*, pity, indignation, envy, humility, repentance, self-abasement, shame, regret, anger, vengeance, cruelty. . . . His analysis goes so far that even in *hatred* and *security* he is able to find that grain of sadness that suffices to make these the feelings of slaves . . . Spinoza is not among those who think that a sad passion has something good about it.

The frame of sad/joyful passions is, says Gilles Deleuze (2007), Spinoza’s

way of posing the political problem to himself: how does it happen that people who have power [*pouvoir*], in whatever domain, need to affect us in a sad way? . . . Inspiring sad passions is necessary for the exercise of power . . . : sadness is the affect insofar as it involves the diminution of my power of acting.

45. Whitman, “Proto-Leaf,” in *Leaves of Grass* 1860 edition.
46. D. H. Lawrence objected to this as Whitman’s “awful pudding of One Identity.” But Lawrence also acknowledged that Whitman experimented with a variety of other figures of Sympathy that did not lead to the offensive fantasy of being able to “sink into” the very souls of slaves, prostitutes, and criminals. Lawrence affirms, for example, a sympathy that is not *identification*, not “That negro slave is a man like myself. We share the same identify. And he is bleeding with wounds, oh, oh, is it not myself who is also bleeding with wounds?” but is rather a feeling with (not for) that respects the distance, and preserves the differences, between each being. This is the Sympathy that says
- That negro slave suffers from slavery. He wants to free himself . . . If I can help him I will: I will not take over his wounds and his slavery to myself. But I will help him fight the power that enslaves him . . . if he wants my help, since I see on his face that he needs to be free. (Lawrence [1923] 1977, 174, 184)
47. Reynolds (2005, 111–12) argues that though Whitman rejected their anti-marriage stance, he too celebrated the naturalness and inevitability of what the reformers called “passional attraction.”
48. Martha Nussbaum (2011, 100) follows this approach, arguing that Whitmanian sympathy is not simply a sorrowful sentiment but a “sympathy with teeth,” that is, “one coupled with a . . . call to . . . justice.”
49. Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” section 14, lines 253–54.
50. Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” section 20, lines 289–90.
51. Whitman (2002), “I Am He That Aches with Love.” Here we can also think of how “olfactory sensors” widely distributed in the human skin and between the organs enter into sympathetic communication. See William E. Connolly (2016), “Distributed Agencies and Bumpy Temporalities,” chapter 4.
52. As Catherine Keller (2014, 197) puts it, the sexual politics of *Leaves of Grass* is “planetary in scale.” (She also describes this, on page 208, as an “apophatic polyamory.”)
53. This passage seems to affirm a human exceptionalism. And yet, if sympathy is indeed *elemental*, how can it be that *only the human soul* is capable of “generating and emitting” it? Or perhaps the line should be read to say that what is distinctive to the human is the ability to emit sympathy in a *steady and limitless* way: in that case, sympathy would be elemental and distributed to all matter, but humans would have a special part to play in *amplifying* and *publicizing* it. Or perhaps the line should be read as saying that what the human soul is uniquely capable of generating and emitting is *joy*, and not sympathy at all: in that case, sympathy would be the cosmic force, with joy restricted to humans.

54. Janice Law Trecker (2011, 12–13) positions Whitman’s cosmology between Darwin and Hegel: Existence for Whitman, she argues,

is dynamic and cyclical, as opposed to the then-conventional monotheistic view of life as a one-time progression ruled by providence. “Urge and urge and urge,/Always the procreant urge of the world.” . . . To Whitman, the universe is an ever-changing system, producing new ideas and forms that will combine, a la Hegel, into every new and better life. The force behind this process . . . is . . . biological, a matter of lusts and urges as it was for Darwin.

55. Whitman (1984), “Poem Incarnating the Mind,” *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 107.
56. Whitman (2002), “Preface” to 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
57. Whitman (1984), “Talbot Wilson,” *Notebooks*, vol. 1, 80. In the edited notebook passage cited earlier, we see that Whitman had at one point described sympathy as “abstract,” but then crossed the word out to replace it with the more palatable notion of a “love” for “humanity.” But the specter of an abstract, amoral, and impersonal sympathy returns to haunt him.
58. Whitman (1984), *Notebooks*, vol. I, 330.
59. With gravitational sympathy, the trajectory of Whitman’s writing becomes, says Deleuze (2002, 50), “to carry life to the state of a non-personal power.” That Whitman the man retreats from the possibility of cosmic indifference in his old age does not erase its performative presence in his texts: Horace Traubel reports a May 13, 1888, conversation with Whitman and a man named Moorhouse:

W. speaking of the idea of immortality, of the “fact” as he prefers to call it, added: “When I say immortality I say identity—the survival of the personal soul—your survival, my survival.” Moorhouse: “It could not be otherwise with a man of your optimism. It would be impossible for a man of your optimism to have any other belief.” To which W. replied: “Optimism—pessimism: no one word could explain, enclose, it. There is more, much more, to be canvassed than is included in either word, in both words. I am not prepared to admit fraud in the scheme of the universe—yet without immortality all would be sham and sport of the most tragic nature. I remember, also, what Epictetus said: What is good enough for the universe is good enough for me!—immortality for the universe, immortality is good enough for me!”

60. An early admirer of Whitman wrote that *Leaves of Grass* seeks to induce a “steady and limitless flood” of sympathy, because, politically speaking, there is quite “evidently much work for [it] . . . to do” (Holmes 1902b, 27–28.)
61. Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” section 8.
62. Whitman (2002), “Song of Myself,” section 24.
63. Whitman (1984), *Notebooks*, “February 25, 1857, vol. I, 351.
64. See slowmoney.org, or the popular book by Canadian journalist Carl Honoré (2005).

## References

- Aspiz, Harold. 1998. “There Was a Child Went Forth.” In *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings. New York: Garland Publishing. www.whitmanarchive.org.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. 1997. *Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. 1997. “Sympathy and Solidarity.” In *Feminists Rethink the Self*, edited by Diana Tietjens Meyers, 177–96. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2015. “The Shapes of Odradek and the Edges of Perception.” In *Grain/Vapor/Ray: Textures of the Anthropocene*, edited by Katrin Klingan, Ashkan Sepahvand, Christopher Rosol, and Bernd Scherer, 13–28. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ceniza, Sherry. 1998. *Walt Whitman and Nineteenth Century Woman Reformers*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Clark, Tim. 2008. “The Politics of Sympathy in Deleuze and Rorty.” *Radical Philosophy* 147:33–44.
- Colbert, Charles. 1997. *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Connolly, William E. 2016. *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- De Jong, Mary G. 2013. “Introduction.” In *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Literary and Cultural Practices*, edited by Mary G. DeJong, 1–12. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2002. “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature.” In Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, 36–76. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2007. “Lecture on ‘On Spinoza.’” <http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.com/2007/02/on-spinoza.html> (accessed June 1, 2016).
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1986. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* London: Verso. www.google.com/search?tbo=p&tbm=bks&q=inauthor:%22F%C3%A9lix+Guattari%22.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Pantheon.
- Fowler, Orson Squire. 1849. *Fowler’s Practical Phrenology: Giving a Concise Elementary View of Phrenology*. New York: Fowler and Wells.
- Frank, Jason. 2011. “Promiscuous Citizenship.” In *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by John Seery, 155–85. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Edited by James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Garrison, William Lloyd. 1852. “Harsh Language—Retarding the Cause.” In *Selections from the Writings and Speeches*

- of *William Lloyd Garrison*, vol. 3, 121–33. Boston: R. F. Wallcut.
- Gibbs, Anna. 2008. "Panic! Affect Contagion, Mimesis and Suggestion in the Social Field." *Cultural Studies Review* 14 (2): 130–45.
- Goldman, Emma. 2016. "The Political Psychology of Violence." In *Anarchism and Other Essays*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2162/2162-h/2162-h.htm#violence> (accessed June 1, 2016).
- Gordon, Brandon. 2011. "Physical Sympathy: Hip and Sentimentalism in James Baldwin's *Another Country*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 57 (1): 75–95.
- Holmes, Edmond. 1902a. *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Study and A Selection*. London: Richard Folkard. <http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924022225985> (accessed June 1, 2016).
- Holmes, Edmond. 1902b. *Walt Whitman: A Study and A Selection*. London: John Lane.
- Honoré, Carl. 2005. *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. New York: Harper.
- Johnston, Steven. 2015. *American Dionysia: Violence, Tragedy, and Democratic Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Paul Christian. 2009. "'That I Could Look . . . on My Own Crucifixion and Bloody Crowning': Walt Whitman's Antigallows Writing and the Appeal to Christian Sympathy." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 (Summer): 1–27.
- Jones, Paul Christian. 2011. *Against the Gallows: Antebellum American Writers and the Movement to Abolish Capital Punishment*. Iowa City: Iowa University Press.
- Kateb, George. 2011. "Whitman and the Culture of Democracy." In *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by John Seery, 19–46. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Keller, Catherine. 2014. *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. 1989. *Whitman's Poetry of the Body*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Klatt, L. S. 2008. "The Electric Whitman." *Southern Review* 44 (2): 321–31.
- Krause, Sharon. 2008. *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1923) 1977. "Whitman." In *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 171–87. New York: Penguin Books.
- Lobis, Seth. 2015. *The Virtue of Sympathy: Magic, Philosophy, and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lord, Susan Toth. 2013. "Lydia Maria Child's Use of Sentimentalism in Letters from New-York." In *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Literary and Cultural Practices*, edited by Mary G. DeJong, 89–104. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Loving, Jerome. 2000. *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martel, James. 2010. "States of Indifference: Rousseau, Whitman, and Bersani." *Quinnipiac Law Review* 28 (3): 625–58.
- Massumi, Brian. 2014. *What Animals Can Teach Us about Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moon, Michael. 1993. *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nori, Guiseppe. 1995. "The Problematics of Sympathy an Romantic Historicism." *Studies in Romanticism* 34 (Spring): 3–28.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2011. "Democratic Desire: Walt Whitman." In *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, edited by John Seery, 96–130. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Perry, Bliss. 1906. *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Reynolds, David S. 2005. *Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1909–1914. *On the Inequality among Mankind*. Harvard Classic Ed. <http://www.bartleby.com/34/3/1.html> (accessed 2016, June 1).
- Schoolman, Morton. *Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image and Politics of Perception* (unpublished manuscript).
- Smith, Adam. (1759) 1976. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Stern, Madeleine. 1998. "Fowler, Lorenzo Niles (1811-1896) and Orson Squire (1809-1887)." In *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings. New York: Garland Publishing, Entry 82.
- Traubel, Horace. 1888. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Vol. 1. [www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org).
- Trecker, Janice Law. 2011. "The Ecstatic Epistemology of *Song of Myself*." *Midwest Quarterly* 53 (Fall): 11–25.
- Vrettos, Athena. 1995. *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Whitman, Walt. 1920. "'Our Answer to a Reasonable Question,' March 24, 1846." In *Gathering of the Forces: Editorials, Essays, Literary and Dramatic Reviews and Other Material Written as Editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1846 and 1847*, edited by Cleveland Rogers and John Black, vol. 1, 106–07. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Whitman, Walt. 1921. "'Capital Punishment,' *Brooklyn Daily Times*, May 22, 1858." In *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, edited by Emory Hollaway, vol. 2. New York: Doubleday.
- Whitman, Walt. 1984. "The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman." In *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, edited by Edward F. Grier, vols. I–VI. New York: New York University Press.
- Whitman, Walt. 2002. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings (Norton Critical Edition)*. Edited by Michael Moon. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Wirt, William. 1803. "The Letters of the British Spy," originally published in the *Virginia Argus*, August and September, 1803. Richmond, VA: Samuel Pleasants, Junior.