

HIS MIND WAS FULL OF ABSENCES: WHITMAN AT THE SCENE OF WRITING

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In a notebook entitled, simply, “Words”—an ensemble of variously sized and colored scraps pasted between the covers of a book from which the original pages had been torn out—Walt Whitman writes the word “absences,” tags a dash onto the end of it, and then adds the parenthetical phrase, “(‘his mind was full of absences.’).” Just below this is written the word “apostle,” followed by the underscored and unclosed parenthetical expression “(literally one sent by another.”¹ This page is certainly no more odd than many others in the poet’s writings on language, and the order of “absences” and “apostle” on the page may suggest its companionship among the numerous alphabetical lists of words and definitions that populate the notebooks. Yet there is something peculiarly significant about the juxtaposition of absence and apostle, a fortuitous placement that offers a unique opportunity for understanding how Whitman himself envisioned the relationship between the scene of writing and the scene of reading.²

Though it is a commonplace in Whitman scholarship to acknowledge that, more so than any other American writer, Whitman demands a relationship with his reader, little has been done to articulate how the scene of writing sets up this engagement with the reader. Scholars have identified carefully crafted scenes of reading in the poetry and prose, attempts by Whitman to construct a particular type of reader, one that will ultimately assume what the poet assumes. Such interpretations have left us at times with the lingering specter of Whitman’s poetic totalitarianism, an effort by the poet to colonize the reader in an unceasing struggle for domination.³ Other interpretations have been more generous, reading various transgressions—whether intertextual or between poet and reader—as creative rather than invasive gestures.⁴ Regardless of where scholars situate themselves in terms of Whitman’s engagement with his readership, a preoccupation with the poet’s subtextual encodings often includes tacit presuppositions about the scene of writing. In other words, a fundamental question as to what Whitman intended in the very

enterprise of putting marks on a page underlies such analyses. The purpose of this paper is to uncover what Whitman himself proposes to do at the scene of writing and thus draw that scene into relationship with the scene of reading. With the aid of his writings on language and other notebook manuscripts, I will consider moments of origin in the poetry in order to understand the commerce between the scene of writing and the scene of reading. I am arguing that moments of absence and possession in the poetry and prose create a recursive relationship between these literary scenes, and that the recursivity between absence and possession offers valuable insight into Whitman's own understanding of his poetic project.

Underlying the poet's myriad attempts to articulate a theory of language is the sense of an ineluctable evolutionary progression that repeats the influx and efflux of the writer/reader engagement. Whitman's linguistic writings develop a theory of absent centers and deferred origins, mirroring the creative enterprise of his poetics. We see this most clearly in the early notebook attempts to write race into the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. The early drafts that would lead to "The Sleepers" reveal the poet's struggle to empty out his poetic persona in an effort to create an absent space for the Lucifer figure to occupy. In these early notebooks, the scene of writing emerges as a site of racial crossings and poetic disembodiment. The emptying of the poetic persona allows Whitman to develop absence and passivity as the central tenets of his poetic engagement with the reader. I want to suggest that Whitman's poetic engagement with the reader also functions as a political engagement insofar as it extends the poet's interest in subjected and self-empowered subjective agency. Through writing race, Whitman learns how to create openings for the self-empowered reader he so desires. In order to show how the poet's racial crossings prove to be a testing site for a more radical crossing between poet and reader, this essay will conclude with a reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as an exemplary instance of Whitman's efforts to absent himself from the text by creating textual gaps that clear a space for the reader to fill. As possession reciprocates the act of absencing, the scene of writing and the scene of reading converge, and the subjective space the reader occupies becomes the site of the poem's construction and the effective origin of the poem itself.

What seems self-evident, but perhaps not openly admitted, is that there is an essential passivity to Whitman's persona that creates these gaps and absences—interpretive space—for the empowerment of the reader. The scene of writing leaves itself open to this readerly

possession of the text. Writing becomes a process of creating absent centers, and the scene of writing emerges in the poetry as a site to be filled and possessed by the subjectivity of the reader.⁵ That is to say, at the scene of writing, Whitman's mind is full of absences—not only the absence of words yet lacking from the language, but the absences or gaps encoded in the text and upon which his poetic project depends. Moreover, Whitman's mind is also contemplating apostles, but not in the sense of poets that would follow him. In his writings on language and in his proleptic anticipation of future readers, Whitman cultivates an essentially apostolic language—signs sent in place of Whitman, taking his place *in absentia*. He sets himself up first as passive receptacle, filled and penetrated by language. In turn, his infusion of the reader with language simultaneously empties out the subject position of the poetic persona in a process of subjective absenting that replicates Whitman's initial passivity. The scene of writing and the scene of reading exist as separate but indissociable literary spaces that reciprocally shape the poet's access to the reader and the reader's access to the poetic text. Whitman's self-conscious inscription of the scene of reading at the scene of writing invites the imbrication of these two scenes, resulting in a radical displacement of the poet's subjectivity that, in turn, implicates the role of the reader in the poem's creation.

I. ABSENT CENTERS, DEFERRED ORIGINS

Though Whitman's prolific and often inchoate writings on language always seem to outmaneuver and confound scholarly attempts to ascribe a particular language theory to the poet, Whitman's various linguistic writings are linked together by an incipient notion of the relationship between absence and language. Whitman tends to blur and often conflate spatial and temporal categories, and, in doing so, he finds himself coming upon and articulating an essential cipher or nonplace that lends a negative capability to language's evolutionary progress.⁶ This connecting thread linking the linguistic writings becomes a bridge to the poetry: in the blurred categories of time and space Whitman articulates a necessary absence that offers a new understanding of the relationship between the properties of language he delineates and his poetic project.

We find an early articulation of these conflated categories of time and space in the open letter to Emerson appended to the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman writes, "To poets and literats—

to every woman and man, today or any day, the conditions of the present, needs, dangers, prejudices, and the like, are the perfect conditions on which we are here, and the conditions for wording the future with undissuadable words. These States, receivers of the stamina of past ages and lands, initiate the outlines of repayment a thousand fold.”⁷ James Warren claims that in this passage “Whitman portrays America as the perfect ‘receiver’ of the past, possessing in its present the ‘perfect conditions’ for ‘wording the future’ through its literature.”⁸ This reading stops short of the radical intermingling of time and space suggested by the poet. As Whitman employs them here, the temporal categories designate their own dissolution in the inevitable progress of language that depends upon the recursivity of time, not its assumed linearity. The present comprehends a glance backward and forward and thus becomes in a manner multitemporal, seeming to present, as it were, all time and no time at once. In this commingling of time and space, the present moment serves as an absence to be possessed and animated by language.

Whitman’s linguistic theory adopts an evolutionary momentum toward the future, but this momentum depends upon the recapitulation and revision of what has gone before it. In language, the past is always becoming present as the present “words” the future. The present is both passive and active; possessed by the past, it simultaneously initiates the future. The present as Whitman articulates it functions as the corollary of the poetic enterprise. In other words, Whitman gives us a glimpse here of the poet’s place in the influx and efflux, the passivity and push, of language’s evolutionary progression. Like the “perfect conditions” Whitman invokes in the 1856 letter, the poet also undergoes a diastolic infusion in preparation for the systolic effusion of language, and this process remains eternally recursive in the symbiosis between writing and reading. Whitman alters the dynamics of absence, transforming it from a space of fear to a space of creativity and regeneration. It is not that everything collapses into absence never to return; absence is not a black hole from which nothing escapes. Whitman compels us to believe that language is exactly what does escape, and we come to understand that time gains agency through language. Absence is a space cleared for linguistic possession, “for wording” or for-warding the future. As a site of possession, absence designates a fluid space that allows poet and reader to engage across time the recursive properties of language.

Perhaps the strongest case for this symbiosis between poet and reader is found in the “full confession” footnote in the 1876 “Preface”

in which Whitman claims, "I also *sent out* 'Leaves of Grass' to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, *directly from them to myself*, now and ever" (1034–35 n, my emphases). The poetry is "sent out" based upon the premise of the anticipatory return of "streams of . . . love and friendship." "To this terrible, irrepressible yearning," Whitman continues, "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" (1035 n). The "political significance," as Whitman refers to it, of *Leaves of Grass* resides in the "adhesiveness," the irresistible attraction, that functions as an originary impetus to the poetry. Yet it is a mistake to see Whitman here as merely an insatiable source of gravitation, a centripetal force that simply attracts and swallows the "streams of . . . love and friendship" he so desires. Just as the "perfect conditions" of the present are not allowed to become a black hole from which nothing escapes, the poet of the 1876 "Preface" avoids a centripetal collapse in the centrifugal balance of the "sent out" *Leaves of Grass*. The same originating wholeness or ensemble of poetic creation is simultaneously displaced to the future reader who will complete, reciprocate, and reinitiate the exchange as an "eternal, yet ever-new" circuitry between writer and reader. The yet unwritten origin at the scene of writing—the absent presence that informs the text—is constructed between the scene of writing and the scene of reading.

What develops then as a foundational element in Whitman's linguistic writings, and what serves as the most telling connection between these writings and his poetry, is a complex relationship between writing and absence, origin and wholeness. As suggested in the 1876 "Preface," the origin of *Leaves of Grass* is predicated upon a reciprocal, fluid circuit between writer and reader that anticipates the text's reception and return, the significance of which resides in the "adhesiveness" between writer and reader. This tie between origin and wholeness depends upon the creative act of writing that includes a fundamental lack or absence, the supplement of which is the reader's response that creates the desired wholeness between poet and reader. In other words, the absent center provides the necessary point of entry for the reader into the poem which will in turn allow that reader to complete the reciprocal demands of the poetic text. In the interchange between writing/absence and origin/whole-

ness the most radical concept to emerge is the notion of deferred origin.

We see suggestions of this in “Our Language and Literature” and “America’s Mightiest Inheritance,” but in many ways Whitman is most explicit about this concept in *Democratic Vistas*. His contention that the history of the words “Democracy” and “Nature” “remains unwritten” suggests that what is actually missing is a notion of origin (984). Whitman writes, “We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken’d, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue” (984).⁹ Within the context of the passage, the movement from the “word” Democracy to its “syllables” is a perfectly sound construction, but it also registers an underlying concern with fragmentation and, more specifically, “amputation” in the essay. Just as the word is severed into its syllabic components here, a few pages hence Whitman praises the simple morality of “Conscience” and describes the man who lacks this moral guide as “but an amputation while this deficiency remains,” and just prior to this he offers a “phrase of warning and restraint” concerning the “stores of cephalic knowledge”—a phrase that, with its isolation on the intellect, literally the head, conjures images of decapitation (988).

These images of amputation counter the sought-after unity or ensemble that speaks most directly to Whitman’s notion of origin. Origin becomes the province of the future in the sense that creating the sought-after wholeness lingers as a source yet to be enacted, as the reflected absence of what is yet unwritten. The original wholeness is forgotten, hidden by the parsed syllables of the whole word. Writing for Whitman becomes the creative enterprise of remembering an original wholeness—an act of creating origins. But this too is deferred, even by the language itself that relegates the temporal past to the anticipatory future. At the moment of writing *Democratic Vistas*, this historical origin remains unwritten, leaving an absent wholeness at the center to be filled by an American literature that will go about “wording the future with undissuadable words.” Yet, because Whitman is moving towards a concept of deferred origin, this absence is not a source of anxiety, but the requisite center of the text:

[T]he reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue,

the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. (1016–17)

The apostolic text sent as envoy in place of the author transports the absent center that must be filled-in by the reader, thus existing for the first time as an originating force only in its reception. Whitman contemplates origin as a source deferred until the scene of writing and the scene of reading converge.

II. RACIAL CROSSINGS AT THE SCENE OF WRITING

In this interchange between poet and reader, language pulls in as much as it pushes out or forces itself upon the reader. For this to occur, however, Whitman must first figure out a way to let readers into the text of the poem, to make room for them to participate in the recursive progress of language. He wrestles with this need to empty himself out of the poem most clearly in his struggle to write race into *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's efforts to learn how to write race into the 1855 edition lead him to an understanding of negative capability in his poetry—a coming upon absence that precipitates a racial crossing of the poetic “I.” Recent studies on homoerotic, homosexual, and corporeal elements in Whitman's poetry help to clarify this notion of the absented persona, provocatively suggesting a new understanding of Whitman's emptied out and possessed poetic-self that will, in turn, prove revealing to a discussion of writing race.¹⁰

A number of recent critical approaches, ranging from the spiritual to the medicinal, have increasingly concerned themselves with two particular aspects of the poet's homosexual imagery: liminality and passivity. George Hutchinson argues on behalf of Whitman's passive role in the poetry and suggests a similarity between his poetic practices and presences and the “sexual equivalence of shamanic experience.”¹¹ According to Hutchinson, Whitman achieves a sexual/spiritual transcendence predicated upon temporary moments of passivity in which he allows himself to be possessed by both male and female personae. Byrne Fone identifies a similar dynamic in the Fierce Wrestler figure from Whitman's pre-*Leaves of Grass* notebooks. Poetic inspiration is transformed into a process of penetration and possession as Fone compellingly explicates the way homosexual imagery in Whitman's poetry “add[s] another level of passivity” by placing Whitman's speaker in “the very un-American position of passive recipient of sexual power.”¹² Perhaps most provocatively,

Robert Leigh Davis identifies parallels in Whitman's Civil War writings between his sexual doubts and his uncertainties about American democracy. Invoking John Keats's description of negative capability, Davis writes that in "[r]ejecting ways of knowing based on mastery or control, Whitman presents the in-betweenness of the homosexual healer as a therapeutic habit of mind, a habit of mind capable of sustaining the uncertainties of medicine, capable of 'being in uncertainties,' as Keats said of the poet."¹³

Karen Sánchez-Eppler's work on race, gender, and embodiment further elaborates the in-between site Whitman's persona occupies. She observes in the early notebook poetry the "development of his conception of the poet from an autonomous, self-made being to a site of mediation."¹⁴ Sánchez-Eppler discusses Whitman's poetic mediation as part of a larger project that links literary discourses of embodiment to the political project of feminist-abolitionist discourse in the pre-Civil War era.¹⁵ For Sánchez-Eppler, feminist, abolitionist, and literary concerns coalesce around the problem of embodiment: "Political representation enacts the fiction of a bodiless body politic. Literary representation depends, of course, on a similar though not identical system of proxies: words stand in for an absent physical world" (*TL*, 6). Problems of embodiment arise, however, in relation to female and slave bodies precisely because women and slaves cannot relinquish their corporeality. The physical properties of the body that mark their subordination in nineteenth-century political culture preclude their participation in the "bodiless body politic." This problem is reenacted at the scene of writing. As an in-between site, the scene of writing mediates between the presence and absence of bodies—the particularities of physical embodiment and the erasure of difference and loss of identity. This mediation has more dire consequences for the slave author. For the slave author, the act of writing makes public the bodily constraints and private degradation of enslavement through the recording of those experiences. Regarding Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Sánchez-Eppler contends, "The strained relations between the public record of slavery and the intimate whispers of sexuality are reenacted in the scene of writing" (*TL*, 93).¹⁶ For Jacobs, the scene of writing must mediate between the embodiment of her private, female body that has been degraded and violated within the context of slavery and the "bodiless" claims of feminist-abolitionist discourse.

Though unencumbered by such gendered and racialized consequences, Whitman's poetic and political project depends upon the

corporeal nature of both gender and race. Whitman too must engage in an act of mediation at the scene of writing according to Sánchez-Eppler, treading a fine line between the “linked strategies” of merger and embodiment: “What Whitman seeks in his poetry is simultaneously to express the particularity of bodily experience . . . and to promote the healing sameness of merger” (*TL*, 52).¹⁷ But Whitman’s scene of writing preserves difference in the embodiment of both gendered and racially distinct bodies because he submits to his own poetic disembodiment, vacating his persona and clearing a space for racial and gender crossings. We find an example of such a crossing in “A Song of Joys.” In the poem, Whitman abruptly shifts the persona from male to female:

O the old manhood of me, my noblest joy of all!
 My children and grand-children, my white hair and beard,

 O ripen’d joy of womanhood! O happiness at last!
 I am more than eighty years of age, I am the most
 venerable mother . . .

(327)

An even more fluid gender crossing occurs in the 1855 version of “Faces.” In the space of a single line, Whitman surrenders his persona to the woman, using the elliptic gap to empty himself from the poem and become the female “fullgrown lily’s face”:

Come here, she blushinglly cries Come nigh to me
 limber-hip’d man and give me your finger and thumb,
 Stand at my side till I lean as high as I can upon you,
 Fill me with albescent honey bend down to me,
 Rub to me with your chaffing beard . . rub to my breast and
 shoulders.

(127–28)

In these transgenerating scenes, Whitman performs a kind of gender crossing similar to the racial crossings I will be addressing in the following pages. In these observations and descriptions, the persona appears fluid and passive, vacating a space for differently embodied bodies to mediate between themselves. Sánchez-Eppler insightfully links sexuality, gender, and race in her reading of this dynamic in “The Sleepers”: “Bisexuality, like miscegenation, offers the body not as an irreducible and irreconcilable sign of absolute difference—male versus female, white versus black—but instead as the site where difference meets. . . . [I]t is the ambiguity of the middle position that makes mediation possible” (*TL*, 66). The gendered, sexual, and racial

in-betweenness or ambiguity of the scene of writing endows Whitman with a sense of passive agency. Yet, it is not so much that Whitman lingers as a mediator between difference here. Racial and gender crossings occur at the scene of writing because Whitman willingly absents himself from the poems.

Liminality, passivity, and mediation are not mutually exclusive and, more often than not, the critical frameworks developed by these scholars depend upon their interdependence and interchange as a source of agency and power. The in-between space the poet occupies lends itself to uncertainty, passivity, and possession as the available forms of poetic agency. A Keatsian notion of negative capability turns the characteristics of liminality—hesitancy, ambiguity, and doubt—into the source of poetic creation and poetic intimacy. While these discourses of liminality and mediation usefully elaborate the role of sexuality, gender, and race in Whitman's creative process, the discourse expresses something more fundamental about the passivity and possession such a liminal space inspires.¹⁸ Hesitancy and doubt may characterize the space of creativity and intimacy, but the resultant passivity and possession seem by-products of liminality unique to Whitman's poetry. Whitman devises a liminal aesthetic predicated upon his willingness to remain in uncertainty, and he remains in this indeterminate space most clearly in the planned passivity of the possessed and vacated poetic-self.

This suggests a radically different notion of Whitman's subject position within the poetry, replacing the emphatic, egocentric presence of Whitman's ubiquitous "I" with a poetic persona who yields to various forms of mastery and possession. The possessed and mastered persona offers a different critical perspective from which to consider Whitman's complex attitudes towards racial issues. In what would subsequently find its way into "The Sleepers," the evolution of the Lucifer passage in Whitman's notebooks suggests that race occupied a place of importance equal to, and intertwined with, sexuality and gender in the poet's understanding of his own creative enterprise. Paul Outka supports just such a complementary relationship in his recent argument concerning Whitman's poetry and journalism. Outka convincingly argues that Whitman did not view "race as a *problem* but as an *opportunity* for daring intimacy," and that Whitman's "queering" or "initial 'Othering'" of African American figures in his poetry of race sustains both the racism of the journalism and the "unstable, live, queer, dangerous, desired" fluidity and intimacy of the poetry.¹⁹ In other words, besides Whitman's vastly

complicated perspectives on slavery and black citizenship, race served as a testing ground for a mind so full of absences that it could be intimately (queerly) possessed by what the journalism leads us to believe was the most alien subjectivity the poet could imagine. Through racial crossings, Whitman learns to vacate his subject position in a manner that will give way to a related but different crossing between writer and reader. In his struggle to write race, Whitman develops a writing process that leaves itself open to various forms of mastery from both within and outside of the poetic text.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the race poem that never came to fruition. In one of the many fragmentary notes Whitman compiled for future poems, he contemplates a *Poem of the Black Person* in which he proposes to

infuse the sentiment of a sweeping, surrounding, shielding, protection of the blacks—their passiveness—their character of sudden fits—the abstracted fit—the three picturesque blacks in the men’s cabin in the Fulton ferry boat—their costumes—dinner kettles/ describe them in the poem.—²⁰

Christopher Beach suggests that this fragment “is certainly the point of departure for slavery passages in ‘Song of Myself,’ ‘I Sing the Body Electric,’ and ‘The Sleepers.’”²¹ Even if we could verify that *Poem of the Black Person* preceded the writing of these poems, arguing for this fragment as a “point of departure” is problematic because Whitman’s depiction of the “black person’s” passiveness runs contrary to his other pre-Civil War poetic conceptions of black Americans.²² The most compelling argument as to why this poem was never written, or why it is at best a misguided departure point, is that in this proposed poem Whitman has the passivity reversed.

This becomes more apparent if we consider an often quoted passage from Whitman’s early notebooks:

I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves
I am the poet of the body
And I am

I am the poet of the body
And I am the poet of the soul
I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters
And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,
Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike.²³

Ed Folsom considers this passage an “originating moment of *Leaves of Grass*,” and he reads Lucifer as “the culmination of a voice Whitman was moving toward from his very earliest notes that anticipate the 1855 *Leaves*. In the notebooks where we can first see the stirrings of his radical new poetry, Whitman hesitatingly inscribes a whole new kind of speaking, a wild attempt to voice the full range of selves in his contradictory nation.”²⁴ This leaves open the question as to how this “new kind of speaking” manifests itself. In this notebook passage, Whitman imagines himself “[e]ntering into” the slaves and the masters of slaves. As Sánchez-Eppler argues, “Here the equality of the master and slave lies in their being ‘equally’ possessed” (*TL*, 53). The equality of this dual possession, however, also equally depends upon the dispossession of the poet. His “[e]ntering into” is executed less as poetic invasion and more as a poetic disembodiment of the persona.

If we pursue these original, “hesitatingly inscribe[d]” attempts to write a radically new voice, we read elsewhere in Whitman’s notebooks: “I am a curse: a negro thinks me / You cannot speak for yourself, negro—I lend him my own tongue / I dart like a snake from your mouth.”²⁵ This entire passage undergoes intensive revision, underscoring not merely Whitman’s struggle for precision, but also a struggle to determine his role as medium for this new voice. In the first and second lines, “negro” replaces respectively “black slave” and “slave”—editorial changes that move gradually towards an authentic subjectivity for this silent black thinker. Also, the poet originally lends his “mouth” to the “negro,” which is only subsequently replaced by the more explicit, commingling “tongue.” More interesting, however, is that in the first line Whitman changes the verb in the second clause four times—from “speaks” to “felt” to “thought”—before settling on “thinks.” Though some of these changes can be explained as a matter of syntax, the verb changes mark a progressive movement from ostensible sensory events to cognitive occupation. In other words, through the revising process Whitman gradually absents himself from the textual passage. No longer amanuensis or sympathetic cohort to what the “negro felt,” Whitman allows himself to be possessed by the cognitive mechanisms of an imagined black subjectivity.

This revision helps us to interpret what eventually becomes the Lucifer section in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. Again, the notebooks provide a useful insight into Whitman’s early attempts to write race:

I am a hell-name and a Curse:
Black Lucifer was not dead;
Or if he was I am his sorrowful terrible heir:
I am the God of Revolt—deathless sorrowful vast scorner
 of whoever oppress me[;]
I will either destroy him or he shall release me.²⁶

This passage represents a relatively unadulterated and unmediated surrender of the poetic voice to the Lucifer figure. Significantly lacking from this sequence, both in the notebook and in the 1855 version, is the opening problematic of the silent and presumably inarticulate “negro.” The designation of Lucifer is significant for a number of reasons, but it specifically suggests a reversal of active and passive roles between the poet and the black figure.²⁷ In one of the lengthy footnotes to *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman designates Milton’s Satan as one of many masculine “models, combined, adjusted to other standards than America’s, but of priceless value to her and hers” (983 n). By linking this black figure to Lucifer, Whitman imagines the possession of his poetic persona by an active, athletic, and model subjectivity. To borrow from Fone’s study, the Lucifer figure becomes another type of Fierce Wrestler, adding a complementary layer of racial passivity to the sexual possessions outlined by the scholars discussed above. In these notebook writings, it is the poet, not the “negro,” who assumes the passive role.

In the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* “Black Lucifer” becomes simply “Lucifer,” and the overt reference to revolt is repressed, intimated only in what Christopher Beach refers to as the “cultural intertext” of the whale.²⁸ The placement of the Lucifer passage, however, enacts the process of absenting initiated in the notebook writings by creating a moment of subjective suspension in the poem. Michael Moon claims that “figures of black Americans in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* . . . are included in the text but effectively excluded from its ‘fluid’ dynamics. . . . [T]hey are represented as being disseminated not instantly . . . but only gradually, through their (potential) genealogical positions.”²⁹ While Moon’s argument seems perfectly suited to a poem like “I Sing the Body Electric” with its emphasis on genealogical progression, a poem like “The Sleepers” allows the Lucifer figure to enact another type of textual fluidity, flowing into and filling the vacated space left by Whitman’s momentary absenting. In other words, the inclusion of black Americans results in part from the textual fluidity that allows for the more radical exclusion or emptying of Whitman himself. In connection with this dynamic, the implied

opposition of master and slave in the Lucifer section continues to destabilize the privileged place of mastery throughout Whitman's poetry.³⁰ In this racial crossing, Whitman surrenders his mastery of the text, aligning his poetic persona with passivity and a willingness to be possessed in a manner that will have more complicated implications for the power relations between poet and reader.

The Lucifer section in the 1855 "Sleepers" completes the poet's descent into illness, death, disappointment, and violence before entering into what Carol Zapata Whelan describes as "the sublime shift of awakening and rebirth."³¹ As the poet wanders into the images of violence and alienation, he claims:

A shroud I see—and I am the shroud I wrap a body
and lie in the coffin;
It is dark here underground it is not evil or pain here
. . . . it is blank here, for reasons.

(110)

Described here as a blank, death marks the absence of all sensory experience associated with "everything in the light and air" (110). At the outset of his descent into death, violence, and estrangement, the poet aligns himself with this absence and blankness. If the placement of the Lucifer passage at the end of the sequence signifies the nadir of this poetic wandering, it is a low point that shifts the blankness of death to the subject position of the poet. If we track the progression following the invocation of death's blankness, there is a gradual decentering of the subject that culminates in its possession by the Lucifer figure. The poet "see[s] the white body" of the swimmer dashed against the rocks; he "pick[s] up the dead" washed upon the shore; at "the defeat at Brooklyn," he merely describes the scene, the "I" subsiding as the poet begins to withdraw; in the story of the red squaw, the "I" returns briefly, but only to say that the poet is now speaking with another's voice: "Now I tell what my mother told me today" (111–12). In the story that follows, the "I" entirely disappears, until:

Now Lucifer was not dead or if he was I am his
sorrowful terrible heir;
I have been wronged I am oppressed I hate
him that oppresses me,
I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.

(113)

The poet disappears and the reader now confronts the unencumbered and unqualified influx of the slave's subjective expression. The poet has passed away into blankness and absence, creating a moment of textual suspension akin to death before the images of rebirth and regeneration that mark the poet's return to "gallivant with the light and the air" (113).

The notebook ruminations that led Whitman to write "a negro thinks me" achieve a state of pure sublimation in the 1855 version of "The Sleepers." Though Whitman's initial attempt to speak as the oppressed slave constitutes "an act that," as Folsom notes, "hovers precariously between subjugation of the slave . . . and full recognition of his subjectivity," this precarious subject/object relationship is suppressed in its final poetic form.³² Here, Whitman does not qualify the expression by first claiming to see, hear, speak, or become the slave; the Lucifer figure possesses the poetic "I" and speaks for himself. For the reader, this shift from the sleep-chasing poet to the vehemence of the oppressed slave may be jarring, but as unsettling as such a passage may be, such subjective fluidity invites readers to acknowledge a moment of absence and, in effect, learn for themselves how Whitman invites his reader into the text. As in the Lucifer passage, Whitman's absenting creates a tangible locus for alien identification that simultaneously marks a space for the reader to enter the text.

Before moving this argument from race to reading, I would like to cite a passing comment made by Martin Klammer in his study of Whitman's evolving racial rhetoric because it succinctly articulates one aspect of the complementary relationship that race and readership held for Whitman. Klammer writes that equally "as striking as Whitman's portrayal of African Americans in *Leaves of Grass* is his implicit portrayal of his *readers*—readers he believed would themselves speak a new word about slavery."³³ Klammer does not follow up on what remains latent in his observation about Whitman's implied reader. While Whitman's particular presentation of race—his turning over of poetic voice—was revolutionary, the revolution has more to do with the connection between race and the implied reader than with a "sympathetic poetry about slaves."³⁴ In writing race, Whitman discovers more about a radical absenting of the mind than about race.³⁵ In this light, we can now return to the unwritten *Poem of the Black Person* and interpret it as a proper departure point for Whitman's race writing. A closer look at Whitman's proposal to "infuse . . . their passiveness—their character of sudden fits—the

abstracted fit” will provide a clearer representation of this absenting process.

One of the meanings of “abstracted” that Whitman would have known is “absent in mind” (*OED*). While on one level the passage denotes the black person’s predilection for absent-minded paroxysms, the multivalence of that peculiar phrase “the abstracted fit” suggests a more complicated reading. Though it logically follows the train of thought developed by “passiveness” and “sudden fits,” the phrase also offers a theoretical retrospection on what has preceded—a recapitulation of the possession and absence that characterize the poetic persona. Only when considered in this light does the proposed poem present itself as a more viable departure point for Whitman’s race writing. While “fit” appears here to denote a violent tantrum, it may also suggest the way in which surfaces or bodies or articles are adjusted and adapted to fit one another. In this sense, we can read the near-afterthought of “the abstracted fit” as the poet’s absenting of the mind to accommodate or adjust to a radically new subjectivity. More so than any particular sympathetic portrayal, it is in this radical/racial absenting that race stands at the theoretical heart of Whitman’s democratic poetics.

III. AN AESTHETICS OF ABSENCE

In the transition from race to reading, one question immediately presents itself for consideration: Whatever happened to the tongue Whitman was so eager to lend the “negro”? The poet’s tongue does appear in the 1855 edition, but Whitman has slipped it from the “negro” to the reader: “It is you talking just as much as myself . . . I act as the tongue of you, / It was tied in your mouth . . . in mine it begins to be loosened” (84). Despite the shift in poetic imagery, the performative role of the poet’s tongue remains consistent. Just as we saw above in regards to the Lucifer figure, the poetic persona here yields to the voice of the other—in this case, the reader.³⁶ This transition from the “negro” in the notebooks to the reader in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* suggests that Whitman has resolved one aspect of his struggle with race (how to write it into the text), and that he is now more anxious about his readership. Yet, we should also view this transition as part of a cultural and political continuum for Whitman. That is to say, Whitman can employ the same image to move from race to readership precisely because the reader represents a continuation of his preoccupation with the subjective agency of the other.

The lent tongue that unites race and readership also suggests that the agency of the reader is an extension of Whitman's interest in subjected agencies, an extension that remains politically consistent with his understanding of the American nation and its citizens. Sánchez-Eppler argues that "[f]or Whitman, the human body serves as the site where the issues of representation and the questions of political power intersect" (*TL*, 75).³⁷ Whether preoccupied with the bodies of slaves or the bodies of readers, Whitman merges the poetic and the political in his various embodiments and disembodiments. Vincent J. Bertolini makes a similar point, arguing that "the performative 'styles,' . . . of self-relation that we see the speaker performing are meant to illustrate a fundamental theoretical commitment of his: namely, that however much identities are products of history and ideology, individuals can gain a perspective upon their identities as such, a process that can unlock new subjective power in them."³⁸ In other words, the shift from race to readership remains political for Whitman because race provides him with a way to contemplate reading as a political act of subjective self-empowerment that will have consequences for both his poetic project and the future of the nation.

So Whitman repeats this textual tonguing in various forms throughout the poetry, but his embrace of the reader is nowhere more explicit than in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."³⁹ Though scholars tend to address "Brooklyn Ferry" primarily in terms of Whitman's active and aggressive poetic persona, the value of the poem actually depends upon the persona's passivity and willingness to be possessed. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman writes himself into absence—empties himself out of the poem—to prepare the text for its possession by the reader. This readerly possession is not easily won however. The reader faces Whitman's poetic persona in some of its most domineering and confrontational poses. But this apparent mastery over the reader disguises a much more nuanced engagement, a contact between writer and reader that neither negates the athletic reader that Whitman calls for nor settles for a textually emplaced reader who functions as passive recipient for the poet's meaning. Whitman balances the apparent subordination of the reader by creating momentary suspensions in the poem, replicating the processes of absencing and possession discussed above. Wolfgang Iser's theory of active reading, specifically his ideas about the role of "textual blanks," helps to elaborate this process. Iser contends that "[a]s blanks suspend connectability of textual patterns, the resultant

break in *good continuation* intensifies the acts of ideation on the reader's part, and in this respect the blank functions as an elementary condition of communication."⁴⁰ In "Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman employs literal blanks—gaps between lines of text—to establish the space of communication between poet and reader, but he also develops a more subtle variation of this textual suspension, disguised by the aggression of the poetic persona. Whitman's most aggressive attempts to fuse with his reader constitute their own breaks in "*good continuation*" by forcing the act of writing upon the act of reading. In other words, the linear chronology that makes writing anterior to reading dissolves in a multitemporal gesture that allows the scene of writing and the scene of reading to converge.⁴¹ In the moments when Whitman most overwhelms his readers, the convergence of writing and reading is brought to the surface, creating a moment of textual suspension that engages, not objectifies, the reader's subjectivity.

This reading runs a bit to the side of those scholars who see in the poem, as Tom Cohen does, an "invariable battle for mastery" enacted by Whitman's inscription of the reader.⁴² Cohen's efforts to uncloak the tyrannical Whitman behind the poetics of seduction lead him to conclude that "[b]y invoking the future reader, the privileged priority of the poet is advanced. . . . Here, the reader is also *anterioed* by inscription, even potentially placed in the faceless, costumed crowd of foreclosed readers/riders, positions crossed, any future 'present' also vacated and parasited." The parasitic element of the vacated space that Cohen advocates suggests a unidirectional dynamic that fails to account for the recursive strategies of Whitman's poetry. Cohen contends that Whitman's ability to see "you" while "you" cannot see him "reverses the obvious: you can read him, you know him, you are anonymous."⁴³ While this reversal of the obvious does occur in the poem, we should also note that Whitman simultaneously encompasses the obvious. In section 9 of the poem, Whitman writes: "Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you" (313). Here we have not the poet's mastery and subordination of the reader, but a reciprocal gazing through the fluid medium of the text that inscribes both writer and reader, neither at the expense of the other.

Underlying this notion of a dual inscription is a concern with how the text of the poem and, more specifically, writing itself function. In a manner complementary to Cohen's reading, Roger Gilbert claims that the poem primarily concerns Whitman's confrontation with the reality of his own mortality, a confrontation waged at the linguistic

level. "Whitman's struggle with death is thus figured in the poem as a struggle with writing," Gilbert argues, "and more importantly a struggle to cross *out* of writing and into speech, into a form of language associated with life and power, not death and absence."⁴⁴ Like Cohen's fear that Whitman relegates the reader to an eternity of anonymous absence, Gilbert also describes absence as the essential compatriot of death. Though Gilbert articulates well the performative nature of Whitman's poetics, the ability to "cross out" of writing into speech through the written text seems dubious. It begs the question as to whether or not such a crossing would remain cloaked in the trappings of death—writing, as Gilbert would have it. The real issue, however, is that such a quandary is necessary only because both Gilbert and Cohen work from the assumption that absence is anathema, a space to be feared for its intimate association with subordination and, ultimately, death. "Brooklyn Ferry" suggests something completely different. As the poem proceeds, Whitman gradually displaces the negative connotations of absence, transforming absence into a space open for possession from outside the text. Moreover, the communicative success of the poem depends upon the absence evoked by the act of writing.

The emphasis placed on Whitman's mastery (of the reader, of time, of space) should not be allowed to elide the obverse passivity of these active engagements. Whitman's inscription of the future reader in "Brooklyn Ferry" inevitably includes the reciprocal inscription of his own writing. Through an invited and reciprocal textual gazing, Whitman surrenders himself to perusal (or objectification), effectively eliding the spatial and temporal distance between the acts of writing and reading. His attempt to occupy the future scene of reading at the scene of writing transforms the latter into an in-between space or, more specifically, a threshold. Whitman can give himself over to this absence because it is a space of creation, not death: the construction of the poem occurs at the scene of reading, and the scene of reading now embodies the original and originating creative impulse traditionally associated with the scene of writing. This transfer of poetic power evinces itself in two key moments in the poem where Whitman suspends the poetic text: first, to invoke the absence of writing and, second, to absent himself from the poem.

Whitman initiates this absenting process in section 4—the short, five-line passage that serves as both coda *in medias res* and the transition to the aggressive thrust of his initial fusing approach:

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
 I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
 The men and women I saw were all near to me,
 Others the same—others who look back on me because I
 look'd forward to them,
 (The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)
 (310)

Following the lengthy catalog in section 3 of all the poet has visually apprehended, as well as that catalog's initial promise that he is with us—"It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not" (308)—section 4 offers a moment of suspension in which spatial and temporal categories do commingle, but they do so specifically here as a convergence of the scenes of writing and reading. The past tense of the poetic apprehension of the external world is balanced by the present tense of the reader who, in looking back on the writer, transforms the enterprise of writing into an occupation (in both senses) of an anticipatory space and time in which the poem would necessarily remain unwritten until the moment of reading that, in turn, draws the poem out of the essential absence that marks anticipation.

In the closing parenthetical line, the poet invokes the threshold space of the scene of writing by literally stopping in the indeterminate "to-day and to-night." It is important to read this line in two ways. First, in this textual suspension, Whitman emplaces himself into the text of the poem—he waits in the text with the assurance that his proleptic vision will be fulfilled in its reciprocation. Additionally, however, this line suggests a more literal cessation at the scene of writing, a momentary suspension of the act of making marks on a page. Such a self-referential moment about the consciousness of writing introduces into the center of the text the tactical absences associated with writing. In other words, at the end of section 4, Whitman's textual habitation simultaneously locates the scene of writing at the scene of reading and initiates a process that will depend upon the absence involved by the practice of writing: the gradual emptying of the writing subject that clears a space—the absent center that Whitman continually implies in the deferred construction of the poem by the reader—for the reader's subjectivity.

The repeated assurance that neither time nor distance avails in section 5, the admission of Whitman's knowledge of evil in section 6, and the unseen and omniscient gaze of section 7 have been read by critics like Cohen as evidence of Whitman's maniacal inscription and manipulation of the reader. The validity of such a reading depends in

large part, however, on how one understands the section that follows—the second moment of suspension in the poem. At the outset of section 8, Whitman surrenders his vision to the reader. The brief account of “mast-hemm’d Manhattan” and the “flood-tide” and the “sea-gulls” moves out of the past-tense descriptions of the poet’s sensory apprehensions into a present in which poet and reader apprehend the external world in a moment of simultaneity. The moment of suspension occurs in the physical blank that Whitman inserts into the section following the moment of fusion: “What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? / Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?” (312). This fusing is complicated since the reader has been positioned as a forced sexual recipient of Whitman’s “meaning.”⁴⁵ Importantly, however, this fusion is phrased as an interrogative, the “Which” of which is not denotative but seems to connote, among other things (such as clasping, calling, and looking), the fluid text of the poem itself which has already opened a space for the interchange between writer and reader. In other words, Whitman’s apparent domination of the reader serves as a moment of release. The myriad connotations of “which”—the element of fusion—suspend connectability, creating a textual blank that engages the reader’s subjectivity in the process that determines the “good continuation” of communication. If fusion occurs, the meaning Whitman pours must simultaneously be drawn since the reader must determine what, indeed, fuses Whitman into her or him.⁴⁶

The literal blank space, the textual gap, the reader confronts after this fusion suspends the reader within the poetic text for an indeterminate amount of time, a suspension more obvious in the context of the entire passage:

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman
or man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into
you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis’d without mentioning it, have you not
accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could
not accomplish is accomplish’d, is it not?

(312)

These questions, too, are disarming in their suggestion of the reader's complicity in this non-consensual climax. Yet, the blank space that precedes this seemingly forced complicity changes the dynamics of the passage.⁴⁷ The literal blank of the textual gap serves a dual purpose: it places absence into the text, actually referencing absence through blank space, and it serves as a tangible locus for the passage's absent referent, namely what in fact has been "accomplish'd." Rather than a smarmy, backhanded attempt to bring us over to his perspective, Whitman creates an absent center around which the whole poem now revolves. In other words, at the scene of writing, Whitman creates a blank or absent space, here literally, for the reader to enter and complete the poem in a reciprocal act of conception. The lack of answers to the culminating questions of section 8 constitutes a further absence, a direct deferral of fulfillment to the reader which simultaneously belies the possibility of fulfillment in the esoteric riddling that guarantees the continuation of interplay among poet, text, and reader. It is a moment in which active aggression yields to passivity and possession. The reference to absence (the blank space) and the absent referent invite the reader into the text; Whitman absents himself from the poem in a passive gesture that defers understanding and meaning to the reader's subjective presence.

The transition from the interplay of absence in the previous section to the imperatives at the beginning of the poem's final section may initially appear problematic, as if Whitman is attempting to establish his mastery over the elements in some permanent way: "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!" (312). Cohen and Gilbert offer differing, but finally unsatisfactory accounts of this transitional phase. Cohen claims that the river "appears now like the 'I' itself, a metaphor cast over the very state of affairs that denies its identity," and Gilbert reads it as the poet "reasserting his former position of absolute mastery over the object-world."⁴⁸ Coming as it does after the intense and direct address to the reader, the more immediate and obvious metonymic association would be with the reader. Opposed to the idea of poetic reversion that underlies both Cohen's and Gilbert's readings, "Flow on, river/reader!" preserves the continuity of the poem while enacting the release of the text to the reader and the absenting of the poet which began in section 4. The transition from suspension and absence to the animated commands of the final section is grounded in the shared experience of the poem and plays upon the give-and-take between the reader's memory and expectation.⁴⁹ If we expected Whitman to

answer the puzzling questions we are surely disappointed, but the preceding text of the poem serves as a type of collective memory which should have prepared us for our implication in the implementation of not the answer, but the continual interplay among poet, text, and reader.⁵⁰

The “dumb, beautiful ministers” that “wait” for us to “receive” them complete the evolution of passivity into absence that the poem enacts:

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate
henceforward,
.....
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you
permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in
you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.
(313)

It is a description of the active passivity we see in Whitman’s evolutionary understanding of language, of the interplay between text and reader, and between the poet and language. Whitman does anything here but cross out of writing. The objects furnish their “parts toward the soul,” and we learn from *Democratic Vistas* that the “other name” for this soul “is LITERATURE” (1005). Or, if that particular intertextual cross-reference is too wrenching, we should consider the more direct resonance of this passage within *Leaves of Grass*. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman writes: “To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow, / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means” (206). Writing remains an integral element to the reception of the objects of the universe; the active “flow” of writing is ever counterpoised by its “insatiate” reception. The initial passivity Whitman introduces in the poem remains open to the continual interplay writing initiates, whether through textual writing or the metaphysical writing of the natural world. The closing lines of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” rearticulate the entire poem as a convergence of the scenes of writing and reading. The penning of the poem itself evolves out of this convergence, and this convergence is reenacted in cyclical eternity through the act of reading. Whitman creates what amounts to an aesthetics of absence: a writing that revolves around an absent center that the poet sends out in the

absolute faith of an ever-revisable interplay between the reader and the deferred origin of the poem's unwritten meaning.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Michael Moon for his revision suggestions. I would especially like to thank Ed Folsom for his insightful comments throughout the revising process.

¹ Walt Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William H. White, 3 vols. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978), 3:683–84.

² My understanding of the “scene of writing” and the “scene of reading” is perhaps most closely affiliated to Richard Brodhead's in his *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993). He contends that “in any actual instance, writing orients itself in or against some understanding of what writing is, does, and is good for that is culturally composed and derived” (8). While my argument is less concerned with the historical forces that determine the meaning or role of writing, I am interested here in writing as an essentially social engagement that recognizes and, in the case of Whitman, requires an understanding of writing and reading as mutually reinforcing activities.

³ For one example of this, see Tom Cohen, “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn Ferry: The Inscription of the Reader in Whitman,” *Arizona Quarterly* 49.2 (1993): 23–51.

⁴ See Daneen Wardrop, “Whitman as Furtive Mother: The Supplementary *Jouissance* of the ‘Ambushed Womb’ in ‘Song of Myself,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 40 (1998): 142–57.

⁵ See Vincent J. Bertolini, “‘Hinting’ and ‘Reminding’: The Rhetoric of Performative Embodiment in *Leaves of Grass*,” *ELH* 69 (2002): 1047–82. Bertolini argues that Whitman invites “the reader’s participatory agency . . . [through] the rhetoric of embodied performativity in the text” (1048). He focuses on the tropes of “hinting,” “reminding,” and “translating” in the poetry in order to show how Whitman “interpellate[s] actual persons who are both socially concrete and *at the same time* numerically singular, those unique individuals whose souls and bodies are at that moment engaged in reading his text” (1059). My argument about the scene of writing and deferred origins holds in common with Bertolini’s argument a number of assumptions about the importance of Whitman displacing himself from the text in order to allow for the reader’s participatory agency.

⁶ See Michael P. Kramer, *Imagining Language in America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992). Kramer has offered a particularly succinct and compelling observation concerning the common thread of Whitman’s linguistic writings. He claims that the “open-ended vision, [the] blurring of the categories of time and space . . . gives coherent form to all the multifarious and disjointed elements of Whitman’s linguistic writings” (115). While Kramer’s observation is useful, it raises questions about the residual effect of these blurred temporal and spatial categories, both in the linguistic writings and in the poetry.

⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America College Edition, 1996), 1359. All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

⁸ James Perrin Warren, *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1990), 10–11.

⁹ For a different reading of this “unwritten” history, see Robert Leigh Davis, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997). Davis claims that “[a]s an ‘unwritten’ word, democracy corresponds with the romance of Whitman’s nursing. . . . [D]emocratic representation is marked by absence for Whitman, marked by what it is missing, by what it cannot see or say or name: the unnamed dead of its war, the untold story of its suffering, the unspoken ‘something else’ of its president” (29).

¹⁰ Bertolini also discusses the importance of the “displaced” and “absented” speaker in Whitman’s poetry. See Bertolini, 1053. Recent queer readings of Whitman provide an alternate model for thinking about this process, one that I think is more helpful than Bertolini acknowledges.

¹¹ George B. Hutchinson, *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism & the Crisis of the Union* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1986), 62. Hutchinson’s analysis portrays Whitman as both a spiritual and creative occupant of an in-between space that allows him easily to shift his subject position from active engagement to passive reception. He goes on to say that “the passive role taken by the poet in [‘The Sleepers’] as in other poems—even when he is the male partner—matches the shaman’s relation to the spiritual companion” (62).

¹² Byrne Fone, *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1992), 80. The passivity of the speaker is transformed into the locus of a new power, a poetic power, Fone contends, that is derived from “his newly learned homoerotic tongue” (80). The “newly learned” tongue suggests that the poetry derives its power from a space of hesitancy and creative doubt—a testing out of sexual and poetic uncertainties in which Whitman cohabits as passive recipient with his Fierce Wrestler.

¹³ Davis, 14. Elsewhere, Davis claims that Whitman’s sexual and democratic doubts “circle the same absent center. . . . Both are written indirectly. Both thrive in a space of creative doubt at odds with the reality of postwar America” (39).

¹⁴ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1993), 54. Hereafter abbreviated *TL* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁵ Sánchez-Eppler argues that “the abolitionist concern with claiming personhood for the racially distinct and physically owned slave body, and the feminist concern with claiming personhood for the sexually distinct and domestically circumscribed female body” challenged pre-Civil War political representations of “a metaphorical and flesh-less political identity” (1).

¹⁶ Elsewhere Sánchez-Eppler notes that for the slave author “the act of writing is affiliated alternately with both self-mastery and enslavement” (84).

¹⁷ For Sánchez-Eppler, “miscegenation” functions as the site of this poetic dynamic in Whitman’s poetry of masters and slaves. She writes that “in the scene of miscegenation racially distinct bodies merge” (52).

¹⁸ For one of the best accounts of liminality in Whitman’s writing practices, see Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991). His analysis of liminal spaces and revisionary practices further supports the notion of creative hesitancy. Moon notes the “interdependence of transgressive writing and censorship” in Whitman’s writing and the “oscillative relationship” between “literality” and “indeterminacy” that

creates a “thoroughly liminal” space in the text, encoding subversive desires within conventionally proscribed terms. This textual space mirrors the liminal space at the scene of writing: the textual oscillation between literality and indeterminacy is a doubling of the creative doubt at the scene of writing/revision (34–35).

¹⁹ Paul H. Outka, “Whitman and Race (‘He’s Queer, He’s Unclear, Get Used to It’),” *Journal of American Studies* 36 (2002): 302, 307.

²⁰ Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier, 6 vols. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984), 4:1346.

²¹ Christopher Beach, “‘Now Lucifer was not dead’: Slavery, Intertextuality, and Subjectivity in *Leaves of Grass*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 25.2 (1995): 29.

²² Edward Grier suggests that Whitman wrote this fragment sometime prior to 1860, but no specific date has been determined. See *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 4:1346.

²³ Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 1:67.

²⁴ Ed Folsom, “Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After,” *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 49–50.

²⁵ Whitman, *The Walt Whitman Archive: A Facsimile of the Poet’s Manuscripts*, ed. Joel Myerson, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993), 3:466.

²⁶ Whitman, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, 3:468. In addition to the first line that Whitman has crossed out, the line beginning “I am the God of Revolt” underwent heavy editing and additions, in which “I am the God of Revolt” replaces the initial phrase, “I am Apollyon,” and the phrase “deathless sorrowful vast” is interpolated above the word “scorner,” which I have assumed was intended to precede the latter term.

²⁷ For a more complete treatment of Whitman’s writings about Lucifer, and the multivalence of that name, see Folsom, 47–53.

²⁸ See Beach, 46. Beach is interested in how Whitman’s poems “mediate between various registers of discourse” (30). He claims that in the nineteenth century the whale was a “‘collective symbol’ or ‘interdiscourse,’ a word or object which stands in relation to several discourses and thus can be appropriated for different purposes in various kinds of speech or writing” (37). With references to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Beach goes on to develop the connection between the whale as collective symbol and the discourse of slavery in “The Sleepers.”

²⁹ Moon, 82.

³⁰ Moon argues that the term “mastery is by no means an unequivocally positive or honorific quality; rather, implicit in its (ostensible) opposites ‘slave(s)’ or ‘slavery,’ it denotes the social and political role of slavemaster—one which the text . . . represents as an oppressive one” (81).

³¹ Carol Zapata Whelan, “‘Do I Contradict Myself?’: Progression Through Contraries in Walt Whitman’s ‘The Sleepers,’” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10 (1992): 35. Whelan reads the poem as a progression through the interdependence of contraries—from sexual ecstasy to violence and alienation to recovery and wholeness. Significantly enough, Whelan concerns herself only with the final version of the poem, and thus she does not address the Lucifer section or its omission in any detail.

³² See Folsom, 51.

³³ Martin Klammer, *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1995), 157. Klammer offers an

insightful explication of the “extrapoetic” forces that contributed to the evolution of Whitman’s discursive strategies for addressing racial issues. He traces the development of Whitman’s treatment of race prior to and including the 1855 edition, leading him to believe “that Whitman’s passionate rhetoric about African Americans developed from a unique and perhaps unrepeatable coalescing of historical and discursive forces at the very moment he was seeking to create a work transcendent and new” (163).

³⁴ Klammer, 4.

³⁵ This also seems particularly true in Outka’s argument about Whitman and race. A permanent sense of otherness compromises the “sympathetic” nature of Whitman’s race poetry. Outka writes: “[I]t is hard to imagine ‘Walt’ not seeing an almost ideal poetic and erotic opportunity (and the two are rarely distinct in Whitman) in *any* ‘amalgamation’ that ‘Nature’ has set an ‘impassible seal’ against. . . . The racist journalist and the progressive poet form not a contradiction or continuum, but a circuit, the binding and release of eroticized political energies” (301–2). I would argue that Whitman’s racial crossings at the scene of writing preserve the poetic and political eroticism of this “impassible seal.”

³⁶ In regards to this passage, Bertolini writes: “Here Whitman imagines not the poet speaking for the reader, but as or in the voice of the reader” (1064).

³⁷ For Sánchez-Eppler, the relationship between poetry and politics in Whitman attains its apex in the figure of the “hounded slave” in the 1855 “Song of Myself” (Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 65). In the figure of the hounded slave, “Whitman employs a manifestly corporeal vocabulary to articulate the union of poet and fugitive, demonstrating how his poetics of merger depends upon the notion of embodiment” (Sánchez-Eppler, 78).

³⁸ Bertolini, 1056.

³⁹ I will be citing the 1891–1892 version of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” in *Poetry and Prose*. Though I realize there are multiple versions of the poem, I have no reason to believe at this point that the textual variants affect the main crux of my argument.

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 189. Iser pays particular attention to how this dynamic functions in terms of the serialization of novels and the blank space in which the reader’s expectations are suspended between increments of publication, but he extends his examination of textual blanks in a manner that has implications for less overt textual suspensions.

⁴¹ See Mark Bauerlein, *Whitman and the American Idiom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1991). Bauerlein contends that “Whitman gives his language a performative as well as a cognitive dimension, staging repeatedly scenes of writing and reading . . . [that] question the very nature of translation” (105). I think this is only half of Whitman’s “staging” technique and that, in addition to the oscillatory stagings of scenes of writing and reading, what we habitually find in the poem is their convergence.

⁴² See Cohen, 25.

⁴³ Cohen, 39.

⁴⁴ Roger Gilbert, “From Anxiety to Power: Grammar and Crisis in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42 (1987): 341. Gilbert examines the interplay of the constative and performative qualities of language in the poem to illustrate Whitman’s transcendence of the absenting and deadly qualities of writing.

⁴⁵ Cohen writes, “It seems that the recurrent fantasy of some readers to be sexually possessed by Whitman may appear the case in a significantly more violating, metaphoric and, just perhaps, less consensual sense” (43).

⁴⁶ I take exception here with Gilbert's reading of this passage as a series of rhetorical questions. He claims that, "because it implicitly answers itself, a rhetorical question deliberately suspends its performativity, converting the interrogative mode into a stylish vehicle for simply making a statement, for conveying a purely constative meaning" (356–57). To suppose that these questions are simply rhetorical ignores the confrontation and completion of the poem by the reader that Whitman invites.

⁴⁷ Gilbert claims that "the most unnerving aspect of the passage is that blank space that follows Whitman's unmistakably orgasmic proclamation of his fusion with us. Words fall away, and we feel the poet's unmediated presence filling that white space" (357). Though I concur that the passage is unnerving in spots, it seems critically presumptuous to claim the blank space is cleared for the "unmediated presence" of the poet. From the outset of the poem, with the trope of the ferry, our immersion into the "[f]lood-tide" (307), our disintegration into the "scheme" (308) and, later, the "eternal float of solution" (312), nothing about the poem seems unmediated, especially the poet's presence.

⁴⁸ See Cohen, 42; and Gilbert, 358. Though Gilbert admits that the poem "vigorously performs an act of psychic crossing that leaves both poet and reader strengthened," the claim to mastery is made explicit, as in Cohen's argument, as a reassertion of the poet's active subject position. Gilbert writes, "In the last section of the poem Whitman crosses definitively into spoken utterance, abandoning the death-saturated written idioms of the middle sections and reasserting his former position of absolute mastery over the object-world" (358).

⁴⁹ Iser's aesthetics of reading lends credence to such an interpretation. He claims that "throughout the reading process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories. However, the text itself does not formulate expectations or their modification; nor does it specify how the connectability of memories is to be implemented" (111).

⁵⁰ Bertolini draws a similar conclusion as it pertains to the tropes of "hinting" and "reminding": "Whitman is interested in what happens in the gap or temporal lapse between hinting and reminding, that moment in poetic communication where performativity can fail, can be infelicitous, but where there can be some positive transformation, necessarily beyond the poet's ken and out of his control" (1063).