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Whitman INQUIRY



BLACK AMERICA AND
THE GOOD GRAY POET

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Kindred Darkness

Whitman in New Orleans

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In early 1848 Walt Whitman traveled by steamboat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, where he had found work as an editor for the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*. He arrived just after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War and expanded the southwestern territory of the United States by over half a million square miles. Whitman had recently been fired from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* for his support of the Wilmot Proviso, which would have prevented the extension of slavery into the newly acquired frontier. The founders of the *Crescent*, Sam McClure and A. A. Hayes, hired Whitman for his knowledge of northeastern journalism. In the first issue, published on 5 March 1848, they took a risky position that must have appealed to him: they began advertising their editorial perspective as “divested of all party politics.” Whitman recalled the moment in his old age:

Probably the influence most deeply pervading everything at that time through the United States, both in physical facts and in sentiment, was the Mexican War, then just ended. Following a brilliant campaign (in which our troops had march'd to the capital city, Mexico, and taken full possession), we were returning after our victory. From the situation of the country, the city of New Orleans had been our channel and entrepot for everything, going and returning. . . . [N]o one who has never seen the society of a city under similar circumstances can understand what a strange vivacity and rattle were given throughout

by such a situation. I remember the crowds of soldiers, the gay young officers, going or coming, the receipt of important news, the many discussions, the returning wounded, and so on.¹

Always a booster, Whitman recalls New Orleans's promise as a hub of commerce and military deployment, as well as the public feeling of national triumph. “Divested of all party politics” himself by the time of these reminiscences, he leaves out certain facts: that New Orleans served crucially as an entrepôt for slaves, that sectional conflict over slavery cut deeply into the period's imperialistic fervor, and that his presence in the South paradoxically had been the result of his opposition to the extension of slavery. The poet of American freedom repeatedly revised the story and the meaning of his spring in New Orleans, building layers of ambiguity around his time in what was then the largest slave market in antebellum North America.²

Often in his postbellum recollections, Whitman associates New Orleans with sensual indulgence. Answering John Addington Symonds's queries about his homosexuality, Whitman retorted that he had fathered illegitimate children down south:

My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South &c: have all been jolly, bodily, and probably open to criticism —

Tho' always unmarried I have had six children — two are dead — One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes me occasionally. Circumstances connected with their benefit and fortune have separated me from intimate relations.

I see I have written with haste & too great effusion — but let it stand.³

This decisively silly confession has stirred up endless controversy. Early twentieth-century research attempted to substantiate this claim through what little is known about his trip to New Orleans.⁴ More than a few Whitmaniacs hoped weakly to confirm his heterosexuality by substantiating his claims to Symonds via New Orleans. One early commentator, for instance, conjectured that his children's mother was “a French Creole or Spaniard . . . a Southern woman, belonging to some noble family.”⁵ In the decades that have intervened since this conversation began, historians of racialization have begun to make clear that the Louisiana

Creoles, born out of permissive local attitudes toward *métissage*, only became "white" by a complex process of political, sexual, and cultural assimilation that lasted well into the twentieth century.⁶ Emory Holloway, the critic most responsible for most of the early work on this period of Whitman's life, hypothesizes that Whitman's reticence in the above passage stems from the likelihood that his female lover was a "Creole octoroon."⁷ In his 1926 study, Holloway reads Whitman's sympathy for prostitutes (throughout *Leaves of Grass*) as inflected by New Orleans culture while carefully pointing out differences between the practice of *plaçage* in New Orleans (where white men kept black or mixed-race women as mistresses in common-law marriages) and more conventionally defined prostitution.

The humorous bluster with which Whitman recalls his "jolly, bodily" spring in the South evaporates when one considers the "circumstances" that might have "separated" the poet from his illegitimate children. Rather than protecting the honor of some noble European woman, Whitman may have been hinting at his patronage of legally circumscribed institutions of interracial mixture like the quadroon balls and *plaçage*. This specifically southern libertinage depended on the system of slavery. Holloway claimed that "all evidence points to New Orleans as the place where he learned what can be taught by romantic passion" (65). What can we say now about relations between this "romantic passion" and the "strange vivacity" of New Orleans as a site of imperial ambition?

Métissage, and the French and Spanish Louisiana institutions that supported it, paradoxically took on new purpose after the transfer of rule to the United States. Because New Orleans came to prominence after the United States outlawed the African slave trade in 1808, the traffic in slaves there was putatively domestic.⁸ The growth of the southern system relied significantly on the sexual reproduction of slavery. The so-called fancy trade of the New Orleans slave market had as much to do with demographic necessity as with the licentiousness of the place as such.⁹ Following Edward Brathwaite, historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall claims that the Afro-Creole culture of Louisiana can be seen "radiating outward from the slave community."¹⁰ The phrase is deliberately abstract, accounting for the myriad ways that an Afro-Creole

might find his or her genealogy leading back to slavery. Whitman's view of the historical background of New Orleans sexual culture and of the connections between slavery and Afro-Creole culture was abstract, associative, and Romantic. However, with a poetic sensitivity to the "rattle" of national transformation happening on the streets of late 1840s New Orleans, Whitman heard auguries of an inchoate black America.

The poet's declarations, especially regarding his paternity, are fundamentally dubious, and so the stakes in Whitman's revisions of the New Orleans period are a bit unclear. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued for the queerness of the lush array of denials and boasts in the letter to Symonds but has also expressed disappointment at the loss it represents for then-emerging gay identity.¹¹ Whitman's longtime companion Peter Doyle was an Irish southerner, a fact that may have contributed to Whitman's notion of the South as a place of languid sexuality. Arguments have been made that "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City"—a key poem that reworks the New Orleans period—is actually about an affair with a man (the manuscript of the poem has "a man" in place of "a woman" as the person "who passionately clung to me"),¹² and the rhetoric of "romantic passion" that hangs around the New Orleans period does little to foreclose the likelihood of Whitman's homosexuality. One might wonder further whether he slept with a man of some African descent. *Leaves of Grass* certainly contains moments in which Whitman appears to revel in the visual pleasures of black male bodies. However, queer theorists, Sedgwick chief among them, have argued the futility of seeking "proof" of real-life homoerotic acts in pre-twentieth-century textual archives. Tackling this already impossible historical problem on the shaky terrain of the New Orleans racial landscape does not help matters.

Research into Whitman's life and work has begun to deemphasize the importance of the short period he spent in New Orleans in the face of these confusions. Citing "mixed evidence," David S. Reynolds writes: "Any thesis about the supposedly transforming effect of the New Orleans period is suspect."¹³ However, the so-called mixed evidence is hard to escape: Reynolds acknowledges that New Orleans expanded Whitman's sympathy for the South, his ideas about American English, and his exposure to black culture. He also agrees with the scholarly consensus that Whitman's

self-identification, in an early notebook, as "the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves" provided the stylistic starting point for the free verse of *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁴ Since Whitman likely wrote this private declaration in the years immediately following his Louisiana journey, it makes sense to reevaluate his experience there in terms of its local black culture. After all, the city offered the largest slave market in the United States and had become home to what Midlo Hall calls "the most Africanized slave culture in the United States."¹⁵

In what follows I return to the record of Whitman's time in New Orleans. I do not finally establish the race or gender of his hypothetical southern lover(s). I also leave unsettled the questions of Whitman's political attitudes toward slavery or his periodic racism toward people of African descent. Instead, I argue that the "Creole" and "Africanized" cultures of New Orleans informed Whitman's poetics. The two main discoveries of my research are simple enough: Whitman saw the city's famed Mardi Gras festivities and engaged, in some way, with New Orleans voodoo. I submit that these two facts are just as important as the once possibility of his illegitimate children and the nuances that city may have carved into his antebellum politics. If New Orleans displaced American ideas of race, it did so not only legally and politically but also significantly in the form of syncretic rituals. To tell the story in this way requires returning to Whitman's Romanticism: his secular spirituality, its connection to his ideas of freedom, and the continuity he saw between subjective love and the project of nation building. New Orleans's Carnival and New Orleans's voodoo express the uneven processes of assimilation that the city had undergone for almost half a century before Whitman's arrival. New Orleans's status as an entrepôt for the coalescing forms of African diasporic culture forms a crucial part of what Emerson surmised was the "long foreground" of Whitman's formation as a poet.¹⁶ Through New Orleans's stylized performances of mixed faith and "liberated" sexuality, African slaves transformed into African Americans and provided strange possibilities for what would become Whitman's poetics of "merging."

In proposing to rethink the New Orleans period, I take my departure from Jonathan Arac, who has made a case for rethinking

Whitman's language as "creole," emphasizing the poet's international sympathies. Arac points to the comparatively significant presence of foreign words in proportion to local colloquialisms in *Leaves*, ranging from Whitman's occasional use of neologisms like "camerado" to the rare use of words like "trottoir." Arac contends that *Leaves* relies much more often on discursive juxtapositions than on some-"autochthonous" American voice. He cites Ralph Waldo Emerson, who called Whitman's poetry "a remarkable mixture of the *Bhagavat-Geeta* and the *New York Herald*."¹⁷ Arac uses the term "creole" in a strictly sociolinguistic sense, meaning a mixed but stable language arising out of colonial encounters and migrations.¹⁸ His choice is polemical and aimed at arguing against the "hypercanonization" of Whitman as the representative of a unified vernacular. Arac does not pay significant attention to the local culture of New Orleans, though his choice is useful for delinking the significance of the New Orleans period from myopic discussions of Whitman's possible offspring. Furthermore, if Whitman's writing is properly "creole," his meditations on people of African descent might extend beyond their role in the drama of antebellum American politics.

In *An American Primer* (1904), Whitman writes what might be called a "proto-creole" theory of national language. He praises the retention of Native American place-names and argues that "the nigger dialect has hints of the future modification of all the words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America."¹⁹ Whitman associates the euphony of African-American English with "the old English instinct for wide open pronunciations—as *yallah* for yellow—*massah* for master."²⁰ The surprising comparison with the British accent supports Arac's case for Whitman's internationalism. On the other hand, this kind of orthographic dialect never really appears in his poetic language. In his notes for this work, Whitman expands on the passage about black and white "tributaries" to American English, suggesting that they might mix sexually to produce this "native grand opera": "Then we should have two sets of words, male and female as they should be."²¹ He figures the pliability of American English pronunciation as a kind of miscegenation. The language of the hypothetical "native grand opera in America"—

a phrase by which Whitman may or may not have meant *Leaves of Grass* itself—should be creole, born out of both cultural and sexual mixture.

Oddly enough, Whitman's most significant use of the word "creole" took place years before his trip to New Orleans. In 1842 Whitman had written a temperance novel entitled *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*. The eponymous protagonist, a virtuous young man from the provinces of Long Island, is corrupted by the loose morals of Manhattan. During the years of his greatest dissipation, Evans moves to Virginia and marries a slave, Margaret, whom Whitman describes repeatedly as "creole." He endows Margaret with a stereotypically emotive sensuality: "The fire of her race burnt with all its brightness in her bosom." The young Whitman, like his contemporaries, associated slavery and blackness with sins of the body. Elsewhere, Evans construes himself as the "Last Slave of Appetite."²² Reynolds has convincingly shown that *Franklin Evans* makes an example of what he calls "immoral reform," insofar as it describes the social ills it seeks to vanquish in richly ambivalent detail, thus implicating the author and the reader in temptation.²³ Thus, it might be said that Whitman was tempted to identify in himself that blackness that he also associated with sin. New Orleans attracted him with its reputation as an American Sodom where he could explore the connections between chattel slavery and overindulgence in physical pleasure. When Whitman was offered the job at the *Crescent*, he must have anticipated experiences that would clarify the moral and political turbulence of his day.

Whitman's first publication in the *Daily Crescent* was a poem entitled "The Mississippi at Midnight," which appeared in the 7 March 1848 issue. The poet narrates a steamboat trip along the river, a "dense black tide" on which the night falls like a "phantom army": "A murky darkness on either side, / and kindred darkness all before us!"²⁴ Whitman later revised the poem for inclusion in *Collect*, balancing the blackness of night with a didactic message:

But when there comes a voluptuous languor,
Soft the sunshine, silent the air,
Bewitching your craft with safety and sweetness,
Then, young pilot of life, beware.²⁵

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The "pilot of life" metaphor advertises the ethical freight of the poem, and yet Whitman never quite makes clear the meaning of the "murky darkness." The poem offers a kind of excursus on the moralized color symbolism that American Renaissance authors used to construe racial issues.²⁶ It recalls the racially and topographically symbolic language of Franklin Evans's self-diagnosis: "The unhappy victim of intemperance cannot tell when he commits even the most egregious violations of right; so muddied are his perceptions, and so darkened are all his powers of penetration."²⁷ One suspects that the young Whitman had not taken the poem's retrospective warning against the "voluptuous languor" of the subtropics. Franklin Evans certainly did not. One might also more simply say that Whitman's boasts of an illicit paternity hint at a sort of "kindred darkness." In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman would present the interlocking issues of race, miscegenation, and sensual indulgence as important to the fulfillment of American national promise.

As a much older man writing in *November Boughs* (1888), Whitman admits to partaking of the alcoholic luxuries of southern living and at the same time draws an even more direct connection between the alcoholic aspects of New Orleans decadence and slavery: "About nice drinks, anyhow, my recollection of the 'cobblers' (with strawberries and snow on top of the large tumblers,) and also the exquisite wines, and the perfect and mild French brandy, help the regretful reminiscence of my New Orleans experiences of those days. And what splendid and roomy and leisurely bar-rooms! particularly the grand ones of the St. Charles and St. Louis. Bargains, auctions, appointments, business conferences, &c., were generally held in the spaces or recesses of these bar-rooms."²⁸ Somehow, he looks back fondly, across forty years of sectional conflict, on a scene whose pleasures were inextricable from slavery. In *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, Walter Johnson uncovers an informal "network" that ran from the bars of New Orleans to the "peculiar institution": "Every bartender was a potential broker."²⁹ The "slavery of appetite" was not just a figure of speech; it was a way of representing the total insinuation of the slave system into every aspect of moral and physical life. Whitman thus saw in New Orleans a luxuriant society that depended completely on and thrived in

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the grip of slavery. He appreciated New Orleans's apparent lack of northeastern moral fussiness. He had grown suspicious of the dogmatism of the temperance advocates and resisted abolitionism, though he remained antislavery. The city thus acted as a moral experiment in which "romantic passion" was brought to a fevered pitch by the cultures of slavery. Its local practices offered an imaginative resolution of the dynamic of freedom and slavery he had seen differently in New York.

While at the *Crescent*, Whitman wrote a series of urban sketches, a new form that allowed him to capture New Orleans's "strange vivacity" in language.³⁰ These feuilletons, or "little leaves," as they were known in the French newspapers, also allowed Whitman to avoid the hackwork editorializing that got him into trouble at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Walter Benjamin suggested that the speculations of the feuilletonist might be thought of as "botanizing on the asphalt," and New Orleans certainly provided Whitman with opportunities for amateur genealogical research.³¹ In one sketch, he writes of a mixed-race woman who sells flowers: "[Dusky] Grisette is not a 'blue' by any means, rather a *brune*, or, more prettily, a *brunette*—'but that's not much, the vermillion of her cheeks shows straight through the veil, and her long glossy hair is *nearly straight*. There are many who affect the *brune* rather than the *blonde*, at least when they wish to purchase a bouquet—and as 'Night shows stars and women in a better light,' they have a pleasant smile and bewitching glance thrown in for the bargain."³² In *Franklin Evans*, Whitman had described Margaret in similar confusion, "doubtful whether he is gazing on a brunette, or one who has indeed some hue of African blood in her veins."³³ Here Whitman avoids the standard tripartite racial classifications of New Orleans society—he makes no mention of "creoles" or "octoroons," for instance. Instead, he offers "faint clews and indirections," focusing on the woman's "*nearly straight*" hair and the sanguinity of her "vermillion" cheeks.

Whitman further aestheticizes the encounter with Dusky through a complex series of references. The first of these, "but that's not much," is a short misquotation from Shakespeare's *Othello* (3.3.270), specifically, the monologue in which Othello wonders whether his blackness has driven Desdemona to unfaithfulness: "Haply for I am black, / and have not those soft

parts of conversation . . . yet that's not much." Here, Whitman's half-comic inferences about Dusky's race echo the Moor's much more serious deliberations about race and sexuality. Further into the passage, Whitman quotes Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24): the line "Night shows stars and women in a better light" is taken from Canto 2, in which the main character falls for Haidee, the exotic but innocent daughter of a Greek pirate and slaver. In this case, Whitman borrows from the European tradition to overturn some of the aesthetic prejudice around night and the color black. He suggests that all of this learning is unavailable to Dusky herself—she may be a "brunette," but she is "not a blue," as in "blue-stocking," a woman inclined to intellectual pursuits. The sketch is fundamentally and copiously allusive and treats the rich racial complexity of New Orleans life with a kind of winking discretion. Rather than describing Dusky in realistic exactitude, Whitman adds to her mystique, setting her within a dance of literary, cultural, and political references.

Finally, Whitman hints that Dusky's customers have an economic interest in *her* as much as they do in her flowers: "There are many who affect the *brune* rather than the *blonde*, at least when they wish to purchase a bouquet." He suggests that some of her customers might desire a particular color of flower seller as much as they worry over the color of the flowers. Benjamin claimed that prostitutes appeared in the feuilletons frequently because they form a "dialectical image" embodying "both seller and sold in one" and thus provide a window onto messianic cultural and political possibilities.³⁴ Whitman points to Dusky's role in the local sexual economy through a series of elevating cultural references. He saw in the mixed-race women of New Orleans a thick network of signification and later realized his difficulty in articulating what they synthesized for him. In conversation with Horace Traubel, Whitman depicted the Creole women as offering predecessors to his own "loafing," claiming that their "habits" are "indolent, yet not lazy as we define laziness North." He goes on to suggest (partly now using Traubel's socialist language) that the Afro-Creole women are "a hard class to comprehend . . . fascinating, magnetic, sexual, ignorant, illiterate: always more than pretty—'pretty' is too weak a word to apply to them."³⁵ In another of his sketches for the *Crescent*, Whitman would confront a more

formal, public incarnation of the messianic politics he saw in the Afro-Creoles.

Near the end of his stay in New Orleans, Whitman went on Maundy Thursday of the Catholic Holy Week, the evening of the Last Supper, to Saint Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square. In reporting the scene, he takes note of its "solemnity" and again finds himself drawn to the beauty of New Orleans's "duskier" female residents: "Our dark-eyed Creole beauties, with their gilt-edged prayer books in their hands, would walk in with an air that seemed to say that beauty was part of religion."⁸⁶ This remark has a very specific context. The transition from French and Spanish to considerably more racist American Catholic stewardship stirred up controversy in the Saint Louis Cathedral; through the first half of the nineteenth century, Afro-Creole congregants found it an increasingly inhospitable place to worship.⁸⁷ In Armand Lanusse's 1845 anthology of Francophone Afro-Creole poets, *Les cenelles* (The hollyberries), Mirtil-Ferdinand Liotau wrote a poem about the conflict entitled "An Impression":

Church of Saint-Louis, old temple shrine,
You are today empty and deserted!
Those who were entrusted in this world to your care,
Scorning the needs of the sacred tabernacle,
Have led the Christian army elsewhere.⁸⁸

Liotau takes a different turn on the doctrinal conflict, figuring the church as "empty" to represent its abandonment of the Afro-Creole flock. The conceit relies on poetic license, since the church remained the center of Catholic worship in the city as Irish immigrants replaced the Afro-Creole congregants. However, the poem also hints at the increasing popularity of voodoo and spiritualist practices through the 1840s, which drew worshippers away from the Catholic Church. Liotau's use of the French idiomatic expression *ici bas*, which Regine Latortue and Gleason R. W. Adams translate here as "in this world" but which literally means "down here," has some idiomatic resonances worth remarking both within the Christian tradition and in Creole traditions of Afro-diasporic religion. The related expression *là-bas*, meaning "down there," can connote hell or earthly damnation, as in French symbolist J. K. Huysmann's novel about Satanism entitled *Là-*

Bas (1891). In Haitian *vodou*, the name of the spirit Papa Legba comes out of the homophony between the French *là-bas* and the Yoruban orisha Eshu Elegbara. Papa Legba, in Haitian vodou cosmology, acts as the main liaison between the *loa*, or deities, and humanity; in this office, he is addressed at the beginning and end of most vodou services. His phonemic legibility in the poem suggests that if the "Christian army" has been led "elsewhere," that "elsewhere" has distinctly African diasporic dimensions. The "air" of Whitman's "dark-eyed Creole beauties" thus stirred up energies well beyond their luxuriant sexuality. They stood for an aestheticized Catholicism, an alternative to capitalist conformity, and a political courage inextricable from African diasporic religion. For Whitman, they may also have stood for a new union of body and soul through poetic language.

Contemporary African American writers also saw rich possibilities in the spiritually inflected culture of the Afro-Creole women of New Orleans. Martin Delany, in his novel of black revolution, *Blake, or The Fists of America* (1859-62), depicts a street life sparked with fleeting interracial harmonies: "Here might be seen the fashionable young white lady of French or American extraction, and there the handsome, and frequently beautiful, maiden of African origin, mulatto, quadroon, or sterling black, all fondly interchanging civilities, and receiving some memento or keepsake from the hand of an acquaintance. Many lively jests and impressive flings of delicate civility noted the greetings of passersby. Freedom seemed as though for once enshielded by her sacred robes and crowned with cap and wand in hand, to go forth untrammelled through the highways of the town."⁸⁹ Surrounded by absolute bondage, the city provided some of its black residents with an extravagant, seemingly metaphysical liberty. Here "freedom" appears as conversational ephemera ("flings of delicate civility"), then becomes a gift ("some memento or keepsake"), and finally emerges as a long-cloistered goddess. Delany defines the freedoms offered by New Orleans in terms of access to relations across racial categories, even though elsewhere in the novel he is careful to note legalistic restraints on black sociability. The image of the goddess casts this freedom in some kind of "pagan" messianism. It has a peculiarly New Orleans context—the goddess recalls the so-called allegorical floats that first appeared in

Carnival parades during the decade before Whitman arrived in New Orleans. The figuration of Liberty as a goddess would also become a centerpiece of the poet's cosmology.

In the *Crescent*, Whitman calls New Orleans "a remarkably free city."⁴⁰ Even Delany, one of the most radical black public intellectuals of the nineteenth century, felt this periodic freedom. How could a city that was notorious for its slave markets, in which "free" young black women were forced by necessity into totally dependent romantic relationships, and in which negotiations over chattel could begin anywhere, be "remarkably free"? Here we hit upon an extraordinary contradiction: New Orleans produced both freedom and slavery simultaneously. Throughout the Mississippi Valley, masters terrorized slaves by warning them that they would be "sold down the river." This threat implied the breakup of families and unknown horrors at the hands of harsher masters. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain both use this idea of New Orleans as a narrative device in their famous novels of slavery. To be bought by residents of New Orleans, however, meant avoiding plantation labor and sharing in the city's more developed black culture. Readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will recall the idylls of Augustine St. Clare's city mansion as an apotheosis of this idea. Solomon Northrup and William Wells Brown, among others, have mentioned that they preferred slavery in New Orleans to slavery elsewhere.

The slave market remained the fixed point around which the ambiguously momentary epiphanies of freedom circulated in New Orleans. Whitman often witnessed the proceedings of the major slave markets on Exchange Place and in the Saint Louis Hotel, all within blocks of the offices of the *Daily Crescent* on St. Charles Avenue. He chose to represent this scene in *Leaves of Grass*, rather than the free Afro-Creole women in whom he had read so much significance.⁴¹ In "I Sing the Body Electric," he bombastically interpolates the motormouth speech of the slave auctioneers into his grandiose and distinctly northern reformist argument:

A slave at auction!

I help the auctioneer . . . the sloven does not half know his business.

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Gentlemen look on this curious creature,
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him,

For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,

For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

In that head the all-affing brain,

In it and below it the making of the attributes of heroes.⁴²

Whitman makes of the mode of the auctioneer an appeal to the shared humanity of the audience and the slave. He maintains the auctioneer's proprietary air, assuring his reader that the male slave will be involuntarily displayed for his gaze: "Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning in tendon and nerve; / They shall be stript that you may see them."⁴³ Where, in Delany, freedom can only appear in public "enshielded by her sacred robes," in this fiery passage, the slave must be denuded so that his humanity can be made apparent. Whitman accords the anonymous slave the transhistorical implication he often reserves for himself. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the poet calls his own brain "baffled," like the slave's here.⁴⁴

When Whitman turns his auctioneer persona toward the female slave, he praises her potential genealogy: "A woman at auction, / She too is not only herself . . . she is the teeming mother of mothers."⁴⁵ Whitman fails to make clear whether the woman's "teeming" encompasses the racial amalgamation of which New Orleans life was emblematic; the anxieties that such miscegenation catalyzed across the antebellum political spectrum do not register in Whitman's celebratory poetic argument. According to Arac, we might think of his auctioneering as "creole" because of the discursive juxtapositions it enacts. Here Whitman pits British and northeastern proto-Darwinism against the means-ends rationality of southern chattel slavery. What's more, in spite of all the scientific attention to bodies in "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman actually borrowed his conceit from Henry Ward Beecher, who in April 1848 staged an "auction" to buy the freedom of two slave girls, Mary and Emily Edmonson.⁴⁶ A fellow Brooklynite and, like Whitman, trying to bridge a compromise between antislavery and antiabolition, Beecher addressed

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his congregation: "Gentlemen, they say she is one of those praying Methodist niggers, who bids? A thousand—fifteen hundred—two thousand—twenty-five hundred! Going, going! Last call! *Go!*"⁴⁷ Where Beecher literally "sells" the freedom of the Edmonson girls, Whitman's lyric rendering lays bare the rhetorical paradox of an antislavery advocate auctioning a slave. While the preacher worries about salvation, the poet aims at a mixture of political, metaphysical, and biological transcendence. Whitman's language is more scientific, more careful; the word "nigger" certainly doesn't appear in *Leaves*. However, Beecher described the scene he caused with a favorite word of the poet's, as a "panic of sympathy." And both consider the ramifications of slavery beyond the life of the individual slave.

Whitman's and Beecher's much-discussed reticence about radical abolitionism frames the strange and ironic combination of protest, collaboration, and identification of the mock slave auction. Both Beecher and Whitman play on regional and economic divisions within their white audiences, on liberal guilt, and on northern mercantile self-regard. In this effect, they drew on their source material; Johnson argues that the transactions of the slave market defined the entire southern class hierarchy. The pageantry of the slave market served symbolic capital, promising whites access to the leisure, distinction, and luxury of plantation ownership. The process distinguished auctioneers as well—from traders, for instance, who were looked upon with some disdain by planter families.⁴⁸ The auctioneers worked on commission and were licensed by the state of Louisiana, which limited their numbers. Traders, on the other hand, made their money by speculation on the market itself, which was seen as less dignified by the more settled planter class. Large audiences ennobled the auctioneers, while the traders operated in the dark recesses of barrooms and hotel parlors. Beecher's and Whitman's personae draw on the professional objectivity of the auctioneer to make space for their ambivalence about abolition. Emerson heard these tones in Whitman's catalog method more generally and qualified his offer of a copy of *Leaves* to Thomas Carlyle: "If you think, as you may, that it is only an auctioneer's inventory of a warehouse, you can light your pipe with it."⁴⁹ Even in his sensitivity to the failings of market capitalism, Whitman believed in its potential to

provide freedom.⁵⁰ The strange poetic spectacle he puts on here anticipates ongoing historical debates about the relation between capitalism and slavery. By playing the slave auctioneer in a poem about the way the body "balks account," Whitman draws his poetics into dangerous and dialectical complicity with a social system that took brutal account of bodies.

Whitman manages to argue the humanity of slaves and take their inventory at the same time. Former slaves occasionally dwelled on moments of forced complicity with the "peculiar institution" in ways that contrast intriguingly with Whitman's mixture of political attitudes and professional ethics in "I Sing the Body Electric." William Wells Brown in 1853, for instance, gives an account of working in the New Orleans slave pens as a barber. He claims, with cutting ambivalence, that the experience gave him "opportunities, far greater than most slaves, of acquiring knowledge of the different phases of the 'peculiar institution.'" Brown writes: "William had to prepare the old slaves for market. He was ordered to shave off the old men's whiskers, and to pluck out the grey hairs where they were not too numerous; where they were, he coloured them with a preparation of blacking with a blacking brush. After having gone through the blacking process, they looked ten or fifteen years younger. William, though not well skilled in the use of scissors and razor, performed the office of the barber tolerably."⁵¹ Brown abets the cosmetic deceptions of the slave market. Johnson points out that this practice concealed the debilitating aspects of plantation labor, thus buttressing the symbolic capital accrued to slave buyers. Slaves were dressed in fine garments, suggesting the supposed gentility of plantation life, before being stripped. Johnson also argues that slaves were forced to substantiate the conventions of scientific racism; they "were made to demonstrate their saleability by outwardly performing their supposed emotional insensibility and physical vitality."⁵² Solomon Northrup, in his account of being sold at the New Orleans market, emphasizes the slavers' interest in his "musical attainments": "We were paraded and made to dance."⁵³ Indeed, Joseph Roach hypothesizes that the "highly theatrical spectacle" of the slave market marks the birthplace of African American comic and musical performance.⁵⁴

Brown refers to himself in the third person, defusing the car-

nivalesque drama of slave sales through coldly diagnostic writing. This technique, drawn from the tradition of spiritual autobiography, could not be more removed from Whitman's "barbaric yawp."⁵⁵ Bravado has no place in Brown's account and points at the cold rationalism of the traders' tricks. He creates a sense of formal distance different from Whitman's calling the slave auctioneer a "sloven." Where Whitman's slaves are stripped of even their skin, exposing their "tendons," and so on, to make the case for their universal humanity, Brown must add blacking where their blackness has faded. While Whitman tries to expand the temporal scope of the slaves' potential by pointing to their ancestors and descendants, Brown must try to shrink the apparent age and experience of the slaves. However, both Brown and Whitman view the market in totalizing, millennialist terms. Brown sees the trader he works for "amassing a fortune by trading in the bones, blood, and nerves, of God's children."⁵⁶ They each approach the politics of slavery with a scientific attention to bodies, divining from physical particularity to cosmological judgment, from the body parts of slaves to their unrecognized infinity. Both marshal a "creole" myriad of discourses—scientific, religious, as well as political—in their rhetorical attacks on slavery.

New Orleans had other, more popular "creole" cultural events that addressed the tensions wrought by the slave market. Early Mardi Gras celebrations expressed interclass resentment between whites through racially charged ritual gestures. Mardi Gras brought New Orleans's license, always rich with racial implications, to fevered pitch before the renunciations of Lent. On Wednesday, 8 March 1848, the *Crescent* ran an unsigned item concerning the previous day's Mardi Gras celebration:

Yesterday was the famous day for those who wished to see the colors of the rainbow in streets and squares. All the principal avenues were filled with persons dressed in the most grotesque costumes. The "turbaned Moor" had his face indelibly made lily white by a dash of flour thrown by the hand of some ineligible imp who had less brains than wit. . . . The celebration of "Mardi Gras" is very pretty, but throwing flour in the face of a man whose imagination is not flowery is an unpoetic act, and moreover, a diabolical abomination.

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In early, "promiscuous" masked processions in New Orleans, packets of flour were among the first "throws," and like many such items, they made talismanic reference to the city's complex racial makeup. The flour ruins the blackface of the "turbaned Moor," a popular costume for white men. New Orleans street celebration displaces dualistic American race relations with Mediterranean characters and Renaissance comedy. Here Whitman saw an act of racial mimicry that would have struck him with more deep cultural-historical dimensions than had the plantation stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy. Roach extrapolates a comparison between New Orleans and Venice inasmuch as both cities acquired reputations as dreamscapes through their bustling ports and markets.⁵⁷ He argues that the local cultural practices of New Orleans memorialize the racial violence of transatlantic history. An incident like this acts as "a release of pent-up furies, a publicly enacted dream of escape from race hatred's waking nightmares."⁵⁸ Roach reads the city as a spatial unconscious, saturated with the effects of the Middle Passage, in which history cuts enjoyment at every turn. His work offers an apt way of viewing the most climactic moments in Whitman, which so often intensify the present with the spiritual history of generations. The young poet certainly saw Mardi Gras celebrations during his visit—he may even have written the above-cited report—and he could not have avoided the enervations of the scene.⁵⁹

In his auctioneer persona, Whitman combined his awareness of slaves' ancestors with hope for their descendants: "This is not only one man . . . he is the father of those who shall be fathers in their turns, / In him the start of populous states and rich republics."⁶⁰ These lines allude vaguely to the forms of black nationalism that had begun to take root in the Americas much earlier. Whitman knew, of course, of the Haitian revolution, which had made New Orleans strategically less attractive to French imperial ambition and which confirmed fears of slave rebellion throughout the hemisphere.⁶¹ His most explicit imagination of black revolution never made it into *Leaves of Grass*. The 1855 version of the poem that would become "The Sleepers" contains traces of a persona that appears to be an enraged slave, stalking the streets and fantasizing violent revenge on his master for breaking up his family:

Kindred Darkness

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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.

Damn him! how he does defile me,
.
How he laughs when I look down the bend after the
steamboat that carries away my woman.⁶²

This passage, deleted in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, leaves inchoate the context of slavery. However, in drafts of the poem, Whitman expanded on this character significantly, following the boat to rescue the slave's family: "I burst the saloon doors and crash a party of passengers."⁶³ He draws on the milieu of antebellum Louisiana, where the specter of slaves stalking the streets at night intimidated the white population. American adjustments made to the *Code Noir* required slaves to return home before a nightly curfew, and a cannon was fired nightly in the Place d'Arms to signal its onset. Delany sets the key scenes in the New Orleans chapters of *Blake* after dark to suggest the danger of such associations. Whitman returns to the "darkness" of the "Mississippi at Midnight," but now in the persona of a black man separated from his family by the trade. He imagines himself interrupting his master's drunken leisure and losing himself in sadistic punishment: "His very aches are ecstasy."⁶⁴

Whitman works through richer figures for his embodiment of the slave:

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.⁶⁵

This passage represents an early and particularly raw moment in Whitman's career-long project of commingling his own voice with "many long dumb voices."⁶⁶ Indeed, in many respects it is a much more audacious example than we find in the published verse. Whitman's critics have long associated his voice with American regional vernaculars like southwestern tall talk

and Bowery b'hoy slang, but this moment indicates that he may have also been influenced by the more cosmopolitan culture of 1840s New Orleans. Roger D. Abrahams, in *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*, points to "talking broad" as an important social function in Afro-Creole culture. The oratorical occasions of Caribbean life — rites of passage, Carnival, and so on — mix high and low, English and African speech in ritualized argument. He notes that this tradition involved "the use of talk to proclaim the presence of self." Abrahams quotes a British traveler to Antigua, Mrs. Lanigan, whose 1844 account of the phenomenon might have appealed to Whitman: "The negroes were indefatigable talkers, at all times and in all seasons. Whether in joy or in grief, they ever find full employment for that little member, the tongue."⁶⁷ In giving voice to slaves, Whitman also gained something for his own voice.

What if Whitman's project of speaking for "long dumb voices" owes something to voodoo spirit possession as well as to William Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads"? The souls of drunks, prostitutes, and slaves bring the poet to his limits; they constitute the ecstatic quality of his verse, and he cries out: "O Christ! My fit is mastering me!"⁶⁸ The ritual context of Whitman's "Lucifer" passage is almost certainly New Orleans voodoo; his vocal and bodily metempsychosis in the snake-tongue simile draws unmistakably on the voodoo concept of spirit possession.⁶⁹ An organized religion in nineteenth-century New Orleans, voodoo worship centered on Damballah, a deity drawn from Haitian vodou and Dahomeyan cosmology whose signature, or maidservant, is a snake. Robert Farris Thompson writes that the name Damballah plays on the Ki-Kongo word for "sleep," and its Haitian *veve* (an iconic symbol drawn on the floor in powder as a beacon to the *loa*) icon often represents two serpents entwined in romantic embrace around a palm tree.⁷⁰ Catholicism acted as a vessel for African diasporic religious practices, and Damballah was associated with Saint Patrick driving the snakes from Ireland and the story of Moses and the brazen serpent. Some interpreters inevitably associated the snake with the incarnation of Satan in the Garden of Eden, especially those who, like Whitman, drew parallels between the vengeance of the slave and that of Lucifer. Zora Neale Hurston notes that in Haitian vodou, Damballah "never does bad,

work" and that he "guards domestic happiness."⁷¹ Thus, in casting himself through the snake as "the God of revolt," Whitman draws clumsily on a very specific African diasporic religious and political context.⁷² Nevertheless, Hurston also reports that Damballah is "the great *source*" of all creation, the oldest spirit in a tradition based on ancestor-worship.⁷³ When Whitman describes his embodiment of the rebellious slave as "deathless, sorrowful, vast," he is not entirely off the mark.⁷⁴

The presence of long-dead spirits among the living had transformative political implications in the Caribbean. Vodou rituals played an integral role in fomenting the Haitian revolution. C. L. R. James writes that "voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy," citing the incendiary rituals conducted in 1791 by Dutty Boukman, who exhorted his followers to "throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all."⁷⁵ Boukman, whose name means "dirty book man" in Jamaican patois, here mixes Enlightenment and sentimental political tropes with African diasporic spirit possession. Many practitioners of Haitian vodou ended up in Louisiana in the aftermath of the revolution either as the slaves of fugitive plantation owners or as bourgeois free people of color seeking asylum. Whitman might have been sympathetic to the Haitian revolution, to its Hegelian fulfillment of the promise of Enlightenment ideals beyond their contemporary practice. If he felt this way about it, he left no indication. On the other hand, New Orleans voodoo certainly represents an example of what Whitman called, in *Democratic Vistas*, "New World metaphysics."⁷⁶

Contemporary New Orleans newspaper reports of voodoo ceremonies often emphasized a rank hedonism rather than a spiritual doctrine:

This kind of meeting appears to be rapidly on the increase. . . . Carried on in secret, they bring the slaves into contact with disorderly free negroes and mischievous whites, and the effect cannot be otherwise than to promote discontent, inflame passions, teach them vicious practices, and in dispose them to the performance of their duty to their masters. . . . The public may have learned from the [recent] Vodou disclosures what takes

place at such meetings—the mystic ceremonies, wild orgies, dancing, singing, etc. . . . The police should have their attention continually alive to the importance of breaking up such unlawful practices.⁷⁷

The passage displays an awareness of the organization of New Orleans voodoo "practices," their communicability, performativity, teachability, and ability to "promote discontent." Marie Laveau and Doctor John, the most popular practitioners in the mid-nineteenth century, were also canny entrepreneurs, often selling their services and gris-gris at fantastic prices. New Orleans voodoo catalyzed fears of black political organizing and black capitalism, and the occasional participation of whites in its rituals also raised concerns about intemperance and miscegenation. Whitman sought, like the voodoos, to "inaugurate a new religion."⁷⁸ His rebellious slave hardly constitutes an organized group; rather, he is a bit like the angry drunken slave who, in Delany's *Blake*, mistakenly gives away the protagonist's plot to start a revolt in New Orleans.⁷⁹

Through the oral and phallic sensuality of the image of the snake tongue, Whitman torques public anxieties about the perceived sexual dangers of voodoo but also works through its intergenerational cosmology. In her fieldwork on New Orleans voodoo, Hurston recorded a curse against "one's enemies" attributed to Marie Laveau by her informant:

Oh Lord, I pray that their fathers and mothers from their furthest generation will not intercede for them before the great throne, and the wombs of their women shall not bear fruit except for strangers, and that they shall become extinct; and pray that the children who may come shall be weak of mind and paralyzed of limb, and that they themselves shall curse them in their turn for ever turning the breath of life in their bodies. . . . I pray that their tongues shall forget how to speak in sweet words, and that it shall be paralyzed, and that all about them will be desolation, pestilence and death.⁸⁰

The punishments sought in this curse resonate with the genealogical disruptions of slavery; it seeks to wreak vengeance across generations, and it leaves its target mute. Like Hurston's curse,

the drafts of "The Sleepers" are not primarily political. In another fragment, Whitman writes of the masters:

May the genitals that
begat them rot
.
They shall not hide themselves
in their graves
I will pursue them thither
Out with their [illegible] coffins —
Out with them from their
shrouds!⁸¹

Whitman's "Lucifer" persona avenges the genealogical disruptions of slavery with a kind of *lex talionis*—he disturbs the graves of the master's dead ancestors and "rots" the "genitals" of the living. This eye-for-an-eye justice would affect the history and present of the white slaveholding South. The curse points not to the fecundity of the subtropical South but to its moral decay and violence. It also clearly references the Haitian voodoo concept of the "zombie" or "zambi." The confusion that attends Whitman's late-in-life boasts about his "six children" might be thought of as haunted by "Lucifer."

Whitman's decision to excise the slave character from "The Sleepers" represents a loss to American poetry that extends beyond the circumstances of the poem itself. The choice to delete the character meant sacrificing a personal protest against slavery that contrasts with the reasoned objectivity of his ironic embodiment of the slave auctioneer. The poetry he has influenced, by African Americans and everybody else, could certainly have used the elaboration of this fiery voicing. How would Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, for starters, have responded to the inclusion of these lines? The poetic argument that lies inchoate in the drafts would have provided a substantial addition to the body of Romanticisms (from Hegel and Goethe to Poe and Melville) that comprise the associations between Satanism, modernity, and black rebellion. By not associating the "Lucifer" passage with New Orleans, critics have missed a key connection between Romanticism and African diasporic tradition. The city's stylized and carnivalesque rituals comprise a specifically black contribu-

tion to Whitman's poetics. What he saw in the black people of New Orleans was not simply an index of the brutality of slavery but also the birth of a national culture that he could only call his own by reaching a long ways. To borrow again from Martin Delany, he saw a people desperately, angrily, and gracefully catching and throwing the "flings" of freedom and culture.

NOTES

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1. Walt Whitman, *November Boughs*, in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1200.
2. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.
3. Walt Whitman, *Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 5:73.
4. The key biographies are Henry Bryan Binns, *A Life of Walt Whitman* (London: Methuen and Company, 1905); and Léon Bazalgette, *Walt Whitman: The Man and His Work*, trans. from the French by Ellen FitzGerald (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1920). Novelizations of Whitman's life have also focused on this episode with similar intentions; see Grant Overton, *The Answerer* (1921); and John Erskine, *The Start of the Road* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1938).
5. Bazalgette, *Walt Whitman*, 83.
6. See Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanisation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).
7. Emory Holloway, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1926), 67.
8. The federal government often failed to prevent smuggling in the region. W. E. B. Du Bois cites naval officers complaining about lax enforcement in the Gulf Coast region through the 1840s. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 162.
9. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 113.
10. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 158.
11. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

12. See Fredson Bowers, *Whitman's Manuscripts: Leaves of Grass (1860)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 64-65.
13. David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 121.
14. Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1:67. The "Talbot Wilson" notebook has been dated everywhere from 1847 to 1854; more recent scholars tend to prefer the 1850s, thus accommodating the ease for the decisiveness of the New Orleans period. For a recent overview of the issues in dating it, see Matt Miller, *Collage of Myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of "Leaves of Grass"* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 2-8.
15. Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 161.
16. From Emerson's famous 21 July 1855 letter to Whitman, in *Poetry and Prose*, 1350.
17. Jonathan Arac, "Whitman and Problems of the Vernacular," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54.
18. Kirsten Silva Gruesz uses Whitman's trip to New Orleans and the likelihood of his engagement there with the city's international newspapers as a point of departure for a history of the literature of the Americas more broadly ("The Mouth of a New Empire: New Orleans in the Transamerican Print Trade," in *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002]).
19. Walt Whitman, *An American Primer* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1904), 24-25. Whitman does not acknowledge the existence of African survival words that move American English further toward becoming a proper creole.
20. *Ibid.*, 24.
21. Walt Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3:748.
22. Walt Whitman, *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate*, in *Early Poems and Fiction*, ed. Thomas Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 82, 80, 98. The poet's brother Jeff, who accompanied him on his journey south, writes in a letter to their mother about the licentiousness of New Orleans's denizens: "They never meet a friend but you have to go and drink and such loose habits." He tries to reassure her with an allusion to the young poet's temperance: "You know that Walter is averse to such habits, so you need not be afraid of our taking it" (Whitman, *Correspondence*, 1:31). Throughout the spring of 1848, the *Crescent* reported daily on the progress of the New Orleans Temperance Society. The phrase "slavery of appetite" was popular among antebellum temperance advocates who sought to draw on
- the rhetorical power of the abolition movement. I discuss Whitman and the slavery of appetite in my book manuscript "Self-Help Poetics: Genealogies of an American Vernacular."
23. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 75.
24. Whitman, "The Mississippi at Midnight," in *Early Poems and Fiction*, 42.
25. Whitman, "The Mississippi at Midnight," in *Poetry and Prose*, 1133-34.
26. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992).
27. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, in *Early Poems and Fiction*, 82.
28. Whitman, *November Boughs*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 1201.
29. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 52.
30. Whitman, "New Orleans in 1848," *November Boughs*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 1200.
31. Walter Benjamin, *Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 68.
32. Walt Whitman, *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1921), 1:203.
33. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 80.
34. *Ibid.*, 41.
35. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), 2:283.
36. Whitman, "The Old Cathedral," in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, 1:222.
37. Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 65-89.
38. Armand Lanusse, ed., *Les cernelles*, trans. Regine Latortue and Gleason R. W. Adams (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 89.
39. Martin Delany, *Blake, or The Huts of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 99.
40. Whitman, "Timothy Goujon, V.O.N.O. (Vender of Oysters in New Orleans)," in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, 1:211.
41. This choice can best be read as another revision of the New Orleans experience. The only reference to miscegenation in *Leaves* is the account of the marriage of a "trapper" and a "red girl" in "Song of Myself" (Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 35). For a poet so preoccupied with issues of race, general-ogy, and sexuality, this is surprising, but it does support my argument that Whitman sought to draw political, religious, and poetic significance from miscegenation more than he sought to confront it.
42. Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," in *Poetry and Prose*, 123.
43. *Ibid.*

44. Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," in *Poetry and Prose*, 312.
45. Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," in *Poetry and Prose*, 124.
46. See also Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 225-29, 284-85, 317.
47. William Beecher and Samuel Scoville, *A Biography of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Charles Webster, 1888), 293.
48. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 54.
49. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, *Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. Joseph Slater (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 509, letter dated 6 May 1856.
50. Mikhail Bakhtin associates the bodily and intellectual freedoms of Renaissance carnival festivities with the emergence of the urban market in ways that are particularly relevant to the New Orleans spectacles like the slave sale and Mardi Gras. He points out that "the billingsgate idiom," the language of the marketplace, "is a two-faced Janus" that inverts "praise and abuse" (*Rabelais and His World* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984], 165).
51. William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 51, 52.
52. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 130.
53. Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853), 79-80.
54. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 211.
55. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 87.
56. Brown, *Clotel*, 50.
57. Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 179.
58. *Ibid.*, 243.
59. A good portion of the material in the *Crescent*, including pieces Hollo-way attributed to Whitman in the 1920s, ran without a byline. The author refers elsewhere to Byron, Whitman's reading for the spring of 1848, and takes a visibly northeastern, moralizing tone.
60. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 123.
61. Michel Rolph-Trouillot has argued that the "silences" around the Haitian revolution stem from the inability of Enlightenment philosophy to fully comprehend it (*Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1995], 70-108). In Whitman, one hears a low murmuring below the silence. He might just as well have been thinking of the various colonization schemes that cropped up among advocates for abolition. New Orleans would have provided an intriguing vantage on such plans, given its proximity to Texas and Central America, two popular poten-

- tial sites for such plans in the American imagination (see Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975]).
62. Whitman, "The Sleepers" (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 113.
63. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (London, ON: privately printed, 1899), 19.
64. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, 19.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Poetry and Prose*, 50.
67. Roger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 29, 28.
68. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in *Poetry and Prose*, 69.
69. In their notes on the poem in the Comprehensive Reader's Edition, Harold Blodgett and Sauley Bradley argue that "The Sleepers" is "the only surrealist American poem of the nineteenth century" (*Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition* [New York: New York University Press, 1965], 424). Reynolds attributes this phenomenon to Whitman's thorough knowledge of spiritualism (*Walt Whitman's America*, 275-76). I submit that New Orleans voodoo is at least as important a context for this passage. For New Orleans voodoo under the rubric of spiritualism, see Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism; and Carolyn Morrow Long, Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).
70. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 177-79.
71. Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 118-19.
72. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, 19.
73. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 119.
74. Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, 19.
75. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Santo Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 86-87.
76. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 1008.
77. *Daily Picayune*, 31 July 1856, 2, cited in Long, *Spiritual Merchants*, 42.
78. Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok," in *Poetry and Prose*, 180.
79. Delany, *Blake*, 106-7.
80. Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (October-December 1931): 337 (emphasis added).
81. Ed Folsom, "Walt Whitman's 'The Sleepers,'" *The Classroom Electric*, accessed 1 January 2012, <http://www.classroomelectric.org>.

