

## DRESSING UNCIVIL NEIGHBOR(HOOD)S. WALT WHITMAN'S ADHESIVE DEMOCRACY IN "CALAMUS" AND "DRUM-TAPS"<sup>1</sup>

LAURA LÓPEZ PEÑA

Escola Universitària Mediterrani, Universitat de Girona

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This article analyzes 19<sup>th</sup>-century US poet Walt Whitman's vindication of "adhesiveness" as imperative to the formation of a social democracy which might heal the neighborly hatreds of a divided United States and bind the nation together at a time of violent fragmentation and Civil War. The article examines Whitman's location of the possibility of politics and democracy at the interpersonal level, and connects the poet's political project in his 1860 "Calamus" with that in the 1865 "Drum-Taps", studying how Whitman's belief in the uniting capacity of love between men remained constant even as he was witnessing the tragic consequences of a four-year Civil War which would widen even more the irreconcilable gulfs between different Americans.

KEY WORDS: Walt Whitman, adhesive love, democracy, "Calamus", "Drum-Taps".

**Vendando heridas entre vecinos/vecindades incívicas. La democracia "adhesiva" de Walt Whitman en "Calamus" y "Drum-Taps"**

Este artículo analiza la defensa del poeta estadounidense del siglo XIX Walt Whitman del concepto de "adhesiveness" como herramienta esencial para la construcción de una democracia social que fuese capaz de curar odios vecinales y unir a la nación norteamericana en tiempos de violentas divisiones y de Guerra Civil. El artículo examina cómo Whitman sitúa la posibilidad de la política y la democracia en el plano interpersonal, y conecta el proyecto político en su "Calamus" de 1860 con el de "Drum-Taps" en 1865, estudiando cómo la fe de Whitman en el poder unificador del amor entre hombres se mantuvo incluso ante la visión de las trágicas consecuencias de cuatro años de Guerra Civil que acentuarían todavía más las brechas irreconciliables entre diferentes norteamericanos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Walt Whitman, amor "adhesivo", democracia, "Calamus" ("Cálamos"), "Drum-Taps" ("Redobles de tambor").

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<sup>1</sup> This article results from research undertaken within the Project "Literatura y comunidades: una visión desde el género" (FEM 2011-23808, Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad), whose Main Researcher is Prof. Marta Segarra, Centre Dona i Literatura, Universitat de Barcelona.

What is it I interchange [...] with strangers?  
 —WALT WHITMAN, “Song of the Open Road”, 1856

O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life!  
 Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs.  
 —WALT WHITMAN, “Not Heaving from my Ribb’d Breast Only”, 1860

In his well-known 1858 speech, President Abraham Lincoln emphasized the fragmented sociopolitical reality of 1850s United States: “A house divided against itself cannot stand’. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*. I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided” (qtd. in Donald, 1995: 206).<sup>2</sup> Lincoln explicitly named slavery the central question behind the nation’s divisions. These divisions dated back to the Declaration of Independence, whereby the United States was established as a sovereign nation-state which preserved slavery as constituent of American democracy. As a consequence of such foundational decision, separate economic developments were established in slave and free states, which determined clear sociopolitical differences between the two regions (Foner, 1990: IX). The different economies and societies gradually generated disunion between Northern and Southern US neighbors, who regarded themselves as unconnected to one another and adhered to their different regional attachments. Tensions intensified as the United States gained new territories in the West throughout the nineteenth century, particularly with the annexation of Texas in 1845 and after the US war with Mexico in 1848, since heated debates erupted about whether or not slavery should be expanded to the new territories incorporated into what the 1787 Constitution had established as the “Union”.<sup>3</sup> To this atmosphere of confrontation, the Compromise of 1850 proved a poor solution, delaying open war yet widening the tensions which deepened the uncivil neighborhood of Northerners and Southerners.<sup>4</sup> Such was the divided America on the verge of

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all italics in the citations in this article correspond to the original. Lincoln’s reference is to Mark 3:25 in the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> See Abel, 2002: 228-231.

<sup>4</sup> The 1850 Compromise enforced the Fugitive Slave Law, by which Northerners were made directly implicated in the preservation of slavery (Abel, 2002: 230). In his lecture “The Fugitive Slave Law” (New York City, March 4, 1854), Bostonian intellectual and abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed his anger that the government made him complicit in the crime of slavery: “I said I had never in my life up to this time suffered from the Slave Institution. Slavery in Virginia or Carolina was like Slavery in Africa or the Feejees, for me. There was an old fugitive law, but it had become, or was fast becoming, a dead letter, and, by the genius and laws of Massachusetts, inoperative. The new Bill made it operative, required me to hunt slaves, and it found citizens in Massachusetts willing to act as judges and captors. [...] The way in which the country was dragged to consent to this, and the disastrous defection (on the miserable cry

Civil War that Walt Whitman —ambitiously, and perhaps naively, but, above all, compassionately— ventured to bind together through his all-embracing *Leaves of Grass*.

On July 4, 1855, the thirty-six-year-old Brooklyn poet Walt Whitman published the first edition of what he expected would become the great epic poem of the United States, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s principal objective with this volume was to dress the wounds of his divided nation, and connect American neighbors North and South, East and West, perhaps even believing that his uniting poetry might prevent a civil war that seemed by then inevitably impending. Whitman’s national embrace in *Leaves of Grass* was born out of the poet’s arousal with the crowds of a growing New York, and of his capacity to feel bonded to strangers. As Ed Folsom has pointed out in the remarkable PBS documentary on the author: “Whitman feels the power of the city of strangers. He’s looking at a city of strangers and how something we might now call urban affection begins to develop” (2008). Whitman observed these strangers with interest, fascination, and even empathy, often projecting himself onto such both close and distant neighbors: “If I were doing that activity that person would be me. If I were wandering the other way, rather than this way, that person could be me. That could be me. That could be me”; wondering “What is it that separates any of us?”, and “How do you come to care for people that you have never seen before and that you may never see again?” (Folsom, 2008).<sup>5</sup> This excitement for the crowds and capacity to feel bonded to these unknown and assorted individuals (and also to individuals in other nation-states, and in other lands, whom Whitman imagines in his poems), combined with the poet’s desire to unite confronted US neighbor(hood)s, constitute the foundations of Whitman’s theory of democracy, deeply connected —as many scholars (e.g. Rodrigo Andrés, Betsy Erkkila, Jerome Loving, and Kenneth Price, among others) have shown— to homoeroticism and even to male homosexuality. This democratic theory would become Whitman’s own “religion”, which he would invoke in an almost messianic tone, calling Americans to develop the “perfect Comrade[ship]” that he portrayed in his poems:

Lover divine and perfect Comrade,  
 Waiting content, invisible yet, but certain,  
 Be thou my God.

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of Union) of the men of letters, of the colleges, of educated men, nay, of some preachers of religion—was the darkest passage in the history. It showed that our prosperity had hurt us, and that we could not be shocked by crime. It showed that the old religion and the sense of the right had faded and gone out; that while we reckoned ourselves a highly cultivated nation, our bellies had run away with our brains, and the principles of culture and progress did not exist” (Emerson, 2000: 784-785).

<sup>5</sup> Folsom’s words appear around minute 19’42 of Mark Zwonitzer’s PBS documentary.

Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,  
 Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,  
 Complete in body and dilate in spirit,  
 Be thou my God. (“Gods”, 1973: 269)

The aim of this article is to analyze Whitman’s vindication of the “love of comrades” as imperative to the formation of a social democracy which might help overcome the neighborly hatreds and divisions of the United States and bind the nation together. In particular, I shall analyze how such a call for democracy is expressed, on the one hand, in the 1860 antebellum cluster of poems incorporated to *Leaves of Grass* “Calamus”, and, on the other hand, in the 1865 Civil War “Drum-Taps”,<sup>6</sup> in order to study how Whitman’s belief in the uniting capacity of love between men remained constant even while he was witnessing the tragic consequences of a four-year fratricidal war which would widen even more the gulfs between American neighbors North and South, and white and black, leaving over a million dead and wounded in the country.<sup>7</sup>

### “[P]ulse of my life”

Whitman’s conception of democracy is rooted in what the poet named “adhesiveness”, a term borrowed from phrenology and which he adapted to convey love between men.<sup>8</sup> In his appropriation of this concept, however, Whitman changed, therefore, its original signification. As Maire Mullins has explained:

Adhesiveness [...] originally took its meanings from the Friendship tradition and signified the affection and emotional bonds that women felt for one other. [...] Although some phrenologists had also used the term to refer to male/male friendships, this meaning would be more fully developed and advanced by Whitman. Robert K. Martin points out that in *Leaves of Grass* adhesiveness “lost its phrenological associations

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<sup>6</sup> Whitman first published “Drum-Taps” in late May 1865 as a separate volume (followed by *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, a few months later, in October 1865), but incorporated it as a cluster of *Leaves of Grass* from the 1867 edition onwards. This article takes as its basis the last version of “Drum-Taps” as it appears in the 1891-92 *Leaves of Grass*. This is why I have used inverted comas instead of italics when referring to the title “Drum-Taps”.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of Union and Confederate Civil War statistics see Kingseed, 2004: 91-92.

<sup>8</sup> Whitman also adopted the term “amativeness” from phrenology in order to denote heterosexual love.

and took on new ones; it evoked the qualities Whitman admired — loyalty, fidelity, sharing, touching”.<sup>9</sup> (Mullins, 2006: 171)

By taking adhesiveness as a vehicle to articulate his views on American democracy, Whitman established a direct connection between democracy and homoeroticism, and even homosexuality. In the words of Christopher Newfield: Whitman “defined mass democracy as the expression of love circulating freely among independent men” (1993: 42). In the 1850s, as the country headed to a civil war, Whitman located in adhesive love the potentiality for an egalitarian social democracy based on friendship and manly affection. This perfect society was, according to Whitman, characterized by the capacity to unite (American) men despite differences of geographical origin (i.e. North or South, East or West), social class, race, religion, or age, through a love that neutralized such differences and emphasized these men’s common Americanness. Adhesive love, therefore, captured the essence of Whitman’s conception of American democracy in that, according to the poet, it promoted a comradeship that eliminated interpersonal hierarchies as well as rivalries and separation. In this ideal social democracy of brothers, Whitman placed the capacity to purify the corruption of the antebellum years, heal the uncivil animosities of the nation, and unite American men. Whitman’s envisioned social democracy was centered on the national/ist context of the United States, yet the poet also attributed to the connecting capacity of adhesiveness a more global dimension, vindicating its potentiality to hold together nations and human beings from around the globe. This, as a matter of fact, was the function Whitman conceived for American democracy. Using what to twenty-first century readers might appear as an uneasy, even imperialist-like, rhetoric of fusion,<sup>10</sup> Whitman described what he regarded as the expansive democratizing capacity of adhesiveness thus:

Infinite are the new and orbic traits wanting to be launch’d forth in the firmament that is, and is to be, America. Lately I have wonder’d whether the last meaning of this cluster of thirty-eight States is not only practical fraternity among themselves —the only real *union* [...]— but for fraternity over the whole globe —that dazzling, pensive dream of ages! Indeed the peculiar glory of our lands, I have come to see, [...] more and more in a vaster, saner, more surrounding Comradeship, uniting closer and closer not only the American States, but all nations, and all humanity. That, O poets! is not that a theme worth chanting, striving for? Why not fix your verses henceforth to the gauge of the round globe?

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<sup>9</sup> Mullins’s is citing Martin’s *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979).

<sup>10</sup> Rodrigo Andrés has brilliantly analyzed the dangers of fusion in Whitman’s project of democracy in “La diferencia como discurso de patriotismo o de disidencia en Walt Whitman y en Herman Melville” (2011).

the whole race? Perhaps the most illustrious culmination of the modern may thus prove to be a signal growth of joyous, more exalted bards of adhesiveness, identically one in soul, but contributed by every nation, each after its distinctive kind. (“Poetry To-Day in America —Shakspere [sic.]— The Future”, 1881: 484)

Whitman located the possibility of politics and democracy at the interpersonal level: “Whitman ties democratic theory to the fluid social arrangements represented, in his view, by male friendship. Friendship does not transcend politics and justice but comprises their realization” (Newfield 1993: 42). To Whitman, adhesiveness was political in that it constituted democracy itself, or, in other words, democracy was the very interpersonal bonds that were established through adhesiveness. As Carmine Sarracino has claimed, Whitman brings his vision of adhesiveness to serve the possibility of social change (1990: 83). Whitman enacted this adhesive vision poetically, first in “Calamus” (1860), vindicating the ideal love of brothers as a means for the healing of American democracy, and later in *Drum-Taps* (1865), portraying the social democracy which he thought was being materialized in the field hospitals where he volunteered during and after the Civil War. It was in these hospitals that Whitman would also *perform* his democratic vision, through his personal relationships with the wounded and dying, in experiences which absorbed the poet’s self during the war years and after, and reaffirmed his belief in the power of adhesiveness which he had previously defended and would continue vindicating throughout his life and in the different editorial revisions of *Leaves of Grass*. The following part of this article is meant to explore such adhesive “enactments” in order to analyze how Whitman imposed on himself the task of connecting contending neighbor(hood)s and healing the divided nation in his poetic articulation of US democracy.

### “No law less than ourselves owning”: “Calamus”

Adhesiveness was Whitman’s poetic political project. Whitman’s first poetic enactment of adhesiveness was in the group of poems named “Calamus”, which he incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* in 1860.<sup>11</sup> Together with Whitman’s Civil War poems in *Drum-Taps*, “Calamus” constitutes Whitman’s most fervent claim for the centrality of manly affection to the American project. Consisting of

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<sup>11</sup> The choice of the word “Calamus” as a title to this cluster of poems continues the uniting symbology of grass in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. As Whitman would claim: “‘Calamus’ is a common word here. It is the very large & aromatic grass, or rush, growing about water-ponds in the valleys —[spears about three feet high —often called ‘sweet flag’— grows all over the Northern and Middle States [...]]. The recherché or ethereal sense of the term, as used in my book, arises probably from the actual Calamus presenting the biggest & hardest kind of spears of grass —and their fresh, aquatic, pungent bouquet” (Whitman, 1961: 347).

thirty-nine poems (considering the 1891, “deathbed”, arrangement of *Leaves of Grass*) portraying feelings and scenes of homoerotic and homosexual love, “Calamus” displays the adhesiveness which, Whitman believed, might purify antebellum American democracy and unite the divided nation. As Carmine Sarracino explains, Whitman realized how fear and hatred, caused by difference and separation, made men enemies to one another, and wondered what might unite these men together in peace (1990: 83). Whitman’s binding proposal was adhesive love, as expressed in the “Calamus” poems. The poetic persona in “Calamus” creates in the poems a space for spreading the poet’s vision of democracy as based on “the manly love of comrades” in all directions across America (“For You O Democracy”, 1973: 117):<sup>12</sup> “I will make the continent indissoluble, / I will make the most splendid race the sun shone upon, / I will make divine magnetic lands, With the love of comrades”, “I will plant companionship”, “I will make inseparable cities” “For you [...], O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!” (117). This love of comrades or adhesiveness (“The dear love of man for his comrades, the attraction of friend to friend”, “Of city for city and land for land”), Whitman claims, is more important than rational knowledge, it is “the base of All Metaphysics” (“The Base of All Metaphysics”, 121). Whitman locates democracy, not in institutions, but in love itself. He expresses his dream that “the new city of Friends” —and, therefore, true democracy, which he places in the looks, actions, and words of men, and conceives as yet to come (for it is a “*new* city of Friends” [“I Dream’d in a Dream”, 133, my italics])— might be materialized. In his almost desperate yearning, the poet calls for adhesiveness-democracy: “O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life! / Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs” (“Not Heaving from my Ribb’d Breast Only”, 119). This call for adhesiveness is a call for perfect equality (“Ah lover and perfect equal” [“Among the Multitude”, 135]), which does not aim at being institutionalized but by itself constitutes an institution “Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument, / The institution of the dear love of comrades” (“I Heard It Was Charged Against Me”, 128). In this latter poem, Whitman is aware that the democracy he is defending is perceived as a threat (“I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions” [128]), since the vision of social equality he preaches evidently clashes with, and defies, the existing hierarchical forces of society. In the words of Rodrigo Andrés: “it is precisely the love between the two men which turns both into equals in a democratic relationship disconnected from any kind of relationship of power or status” (2007: 135, my translation).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all references to the poems in this section are to “Calamus”.

<sup>13</sup> “[...] es precisamente el amor entre los dos hombres que los convierte en iguales dentro de una relación democrática desvinculada de cualquier tipo de relación de poder o de status”.

Vindicating his (homosocial and homosexual) project of social democracy, Whitman takes on the role of prophet of adhesive love, aiming to expand his vision throughout America. In “To the East and to the West”, the poet interconnects the mission of America as a nation with the mission of adhesiveness, proclaiming his belief that “the main purpose of these States is to found a superb friendship, exaltè, previously unknown” which, he claims, “I perceive it waits, and has been always waiting, latent in all men” (134). Whitman’s self-assumed poetic and political function is to unfold such potentiality, to make the nation embrace his project of love and democracy which may redeem the enmities between unfriendly neighborhoods and prevent further divisions which ended up leading to the Civil War less than a year after the publication of “Calamus”. Like the “noiseless, patient spider” in Whitman’s 1868 poem,<sup>14</sup> Whitman “launch[es] forth filament, filament, filament” with his poetry, “Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere” (1973: 450): Thus, Whitman becomes a prophet of adhesiveness-democracy in “Calamus”/*Leaves of Grass*: in the poem “Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes”, the poet confesses that “my soul is borne throughout the open air, / Wafted in all directions O love, for friendship, for you” (125). Restlessly, Whitman sends his message of love, democratically, “To the East and to the West”, to “the man of the Seaside State and of Pennsylvania, / To the Kanadian of the north, to the Southerner I love”, believing that such loving seeds are latent in all men (“To the East and to the West”, 134). Whitman guides the nation in its discovery of its potential, latent loving tendencies: “I wish to infuse myself among you till I see it common for you to walk hand in hand”, he claims in “A Leaf for Hand in Hand” (132). Embarking in an expansionist mission in the name of the social democracy he yearns for,<sup>15</sup> Whitman’s fantasy is to spread adhesive love:

A promise to California,  
Or inland to the great pastoral Plains, and on to Puget sound and Oregon;  
Sojourning east a while longer, soon I travel toward you, to remain, to teach robust American love,  
For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, inland, and along the Western sea;  
For these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will also.  
 (“A Promise to California”, 130-131)

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<sup>14</sup> This poem, entitled “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, was written in 1868 and incorporated as part of the *Leaves of Grass* cluster “Whispers of Heavenly Dead”.

<sup>15</sup> Again, I refer the reader to Rodrigo Andrés’s 2011 work on the dangers of fusion of Whitman’s democratic project.

In his democratic crusade, Whitman accepts “No law less than ourselves owning” (“We Two Boys Together Clinging”, 130), proclaiming the individual, and particularly the love between individuals, as a sovereign in itself. As Christopher Newfield has claimed, Whitman conceives democracy as the self-rule of the crowds (1993: 42), describing a love that is public and based on the interdependence of the lovers (44). Regarding his envisioned democracy largely within the American national context, Whitman, however, also imagines men in other lands who, like himself, feel such latent homoerotic-democratic yearnings. In a transnational way, Whitman crisscrosses such inter-national separation in order to feel as connected to these distant men “as I do to men in my own lands”:

This moment yearning and thoughtful sitting alone,  
It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning and thoughtful,  
It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany, Italy, France, Spain,  
Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia, or Japan, talking other dialects,  
And it seems to me if I could know those men I should become attached to them as I do to men in my own lands,  
O I know I should be happy with them.  
 (“This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful”, 128)

This transnational desire for connection with men in other lands is supplemented by a transtemporal wish to establish a bond with the reader both present and future (“To you yet unborn these, seeking you” [“Full of Life Now”, 136]), with whom a sensual Whitman flirts in intimacy (“Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you, / With the comrade’s long-dwelling kiss or the new husband’s kiss, / For I am the new husband and I am the comrade” [116]) through the material vehicle of the “leaves” composing his book (“Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing, / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip, / Carry me [...] / For thus merely touching you is enough, is best, / And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally” [116]). It is this reader in whom Whitman aims to plant the seeds of adhesiveness and, therefore, the foundations of democracy, and whom he invites to participate in his political project:

Love buds put before you and within you whoever you are,  
Buds to be unfolded on the old terms,  
If you bring the warmth of the sun to them they will open and bring form, color, perfume, to you,  
If you become the aliment and the wet they will become flowers, fruits, tall branches and trees. (“Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone”, 124)

Less than a year after the publication of “Calamus”, the sociopolitical tensions and divisions of the United States reached their maximum levels, as eleven Southern states seceded from the Union and the country headed to civil war.

### **The “true *ensemble* and extent of The States”: “Drum-Taps”**

Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds has claimed that the Civil War was “the culmination of [Whitman’s] entire poetic mission” (1995: 413). When the Civil War started in April 1861,<sup>16</sup> forty-two-year-old Walt Whitman welcomed it as a violent but necessary catharsis that would stitch together the fragmented nation and wash away the sociopolitical evils of antebellum America. The poet, thus, assumed that the conflict would cleanse the United States, and enable its reshaping into a powerful, truly democratic, and (re)united country. He was not exceptional in these thoughts: Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others, perceived the Civil War as a test that would expose the nation’s weaknesses and contribute to make it greater: “The heavenly must dive into the impure, purify and raise it, whilst itself suffers thereby. [...] There never was a nation great except through trial. A religious revolution cuts sharpest, & tests the faith & endurance. A civil war sweeps away all the false issues on which it begun, & arrives presently at real & lasting questions” (1982: 297-298).<sup>17</sup> Choosing war before disunion, Whitman refused to present the conflict as “one of North against South” (Erkkila, 1996: 208), and portrayed it, instead, as a “struggle going on within One identity” and the only means by which that identity could reunite again (1962: 65). When the war started, the poet remained in Manhattan and Long Island, sharing the general mood of excitement and expressing his unfailing support for President Lincoln and the Union. Merely a year later, however, Whitman would discover a much harsher side of the war which absorbed his whole being over many years of his life. After receiving news that his younger brother George Washington Whitman, a Union soldier for the 51<sup>st</sup> New York Volunteers, had been wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, Whitman traveled South in December 1862. A few days after his arrival in Falmouth, VA, Whitman came face to face with a most tragic sight: “Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each cover’d with its brown woolen blanket” (1962: 6). The sight of the amputated limbs and dead bodies of the nation’s young men might have evoked in the poet the very dismemberment of the nation he had so desperately tried to unite with *Leaves of Grass*. Seeing his country(men) at war, and not having achieved the “adhesive” effect that he had

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<sup>16</sup> The event that signaled the beginning of the war was the attack of Fort Sumter (South Carolina) on April 13, 1861.

<sup>17</sup> Entry from November 1, 1862.

intended with his poetry, Whitman now resolved to serve his country by tending to his country's people in times of war. Thus, in January 1863, after George had recovered and had been sent to the front again, Whitman decided to prolong his stay in the area and settled in Washington, DC, for a period that would eventually amount to ten years. In the capital, Whitman took a part-time job as clerk for the Army Paymaster office and, later, at the Indian Bureau and the Attorney General's office (McElroy, 1999: xv), which allowed him time to visit the wounded in the several war hospitals in Washington, DC.

Whitman's volunteering service in the hospitals enabled him to *enact* the role of wound-dresser of the amputated and fragmented America which he had hoped his poetry in *Leaves of Grass* might heal. During these visits, the poet paid individualized attentions to soldiers, Unionist and Confederate, white and black, trying to answer each one's specific needs.<sup>18</sup> Above all, the poet tried to simply be with wounded or dying soldiers, alleviate their aloneness, and satisfy their yearning for communication, love, and human attachment due to their distance from home and the absence of relatives and friends. David Reynolds has argued that soldiers in the hospitals "validated his [Whitman's] vision of the common man; they answered his need [...] for loving comrades; and they permitted full indulgence to his humanistic, magnetic medical ideas" (1995: 425). Moreover, in the hospitals, Whitman could test the efficacy of what the poet called the "medicine of daily affection" (in Lowenfels, 1989: 94), believing that simple acts of love like "[a] word, a friendly turn of the eye or touch of the hand" (Whitman, 1902: 119) could heal the wounded. Thus, hospitals constituted for the poet spaces where he could perform and test the power of the adhesive love he had vindicated, and where he could teach, at the same time, other men the importance of caring, warmth, solidarity, and love. His work in the hospitals reinforced Whitman's views on American democracy, since he claimed to have witnessed in the midst of overwhelming suffering and death an expression of the ideal society of comrades he had called for in "Calamus". Whitman considered that the whole of America was represented in those soldiers. He declared that "[w]hile I was with wounded and sick in thousands of cases from the New England States, and from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and from Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and all the Western States, I was with more or less [men] from all the States, North and South, without exception" (in Erkkila, 1996: 201). The impact of those hospital experiences in Whitman's life and in his lifelong literary project *Leaves of Grass* was such that he confessed

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<sup>18</sup> Whitman performed diverse tasks in his attentions to the wounded in the hospitals of Washington, DC, depending on the needs of each individual. Some of these tasks were, for example, buying and distributing tobacco, providing paper and ink, or writing letters on behalf of the young men. As Reynolds argues, he even "acted as a spiritual and moral adviser to the soldiers, urging them to lead clean, temperate lives" (1995: 429).

that these men had made him realize “the majesty and reality of the American people *en masse*” (Whitman 1995: 49).<sup>19</sup>

In his hospital visits, Whitman performed the role of “Wound-Dresser” (Whitman, 1973: 308) who enacted the value of adhesive love while contributing to “heal” the wounded and trying to restore the bonds between confronted American neighbors at such tragically divisive times. Whitman confessed that he felt recompensed with all the love he gave and received in those years, and thought he was learning “the most profound lesson of my life”, claiming that hospitals showed him the “most fervent view of the true *ensemble* and extent of these States” (1962: 56): “[a]nd curious as it may seem, the War, to me *proved* Humanity, and proved America and the Modern” (59). It was this “Humanity” or social democracy, based on interpersonal bonds, that Whitman set himself to record in *Drum-Taps*.

In “Drum-Taps” (1865), Walt Whitman supplemented the task of uniting confronted neighbors and bringing the nation together with the endeavor to memorialize the thousands of unknown men who lost their lives in the war. Whitman was upset by the fact that the million human beings dead in the Civil War were obliterated under “the significant word UNKNOWN”, adding that in some cemeteries “nearly *all* the dead are Unknown” and wondering if any “visible, material monument can ever fittingly commemorate [them]” (1962: 57). “Drum-Taps” would become Whitman’s poetry memorial to these anonymous men.<sup>20</sup> First published as a separate volume in late May 1865, and later incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* from the 1867 edition onwards, “Drum-Taps” resulted from Whitman’s hospital experiences, from the small notebooks the poet carried in his visits, which later became sources for his poems and other documental writings about the war years such as the 1875 *Memoranda During the War*. Whitman was preoccupied with capturing the vividness of the tragic side of the war he had witnessed. As the poet expressed, the actual act of writing about any Civil War experience needed “to be done while the thing is warm, namely, *at once*” (1961: 172), since “[b]y writing at the instant, the very heartbreak of life is caught” (in Lowenfels, 1989: 14). This writing method is also

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<sup>19</sup> This exposure to suffering and death would also have a direct impact upon Whitman’s health. As John Harmon McElroy explains, during his hospital visits Whitman was exposed to contagious illnesses and it is well-known among Whitman scholars that this intense dedication to the wounded may have contributed to the paralyzing stroke the poet suffered in 1873 (at fifty-four years of age) by which he became an invalid until his death in March 1892 (1999: xvi).

<sup>20</sup> Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War* is another attempt to create literary monuments to the dead of the Civil War and to record part of the hospital drama between 1863 and 1865, which –Whitman believes– “deserves indeed to be recorded—([though] I but suggest it)” (1962: 5).

reflected in the emotional force of “Drum-Taps”. As a matter of fact, Whitman would claim that

My little books were beginnings—they were the ground into which I dropped the seed. [...] I would work in this way when I was out in the crowds, then put the stuff together at home. *Drum Taps* was all written in that manner—all of it put together by fits and starts, on the field, in the hospitals, as I worked with the soldier boys. Some days I was more emotional than others; then I would suffer all the extra horrors of my experience; I would try to write blind, blind with my own tears. (in Traubel, 1908: 4)

In this respect, “Drum-Taps” was an instrument to report to civilians the social democracy Whitman thought soldiers had been creating, paradoxically, in the context of the hospitals and tents, during the war. Thus, the “coming democracy” or the democracy he presented as “to come” in “Calamus” had materialized, in Whitman’s eyes, in the hospitals, and the dresser-poet’s hope was that this democracy would expand to postbellum American society. With the purpose of contributing his own poetic record of the war in order to dress the wounds of the nation and persuade his fellow citizens into embracing the new democratic society his poems portrayed, Whitman assumed the role of mediator in “Drum-Taps”, continuing the political project he had embarked on in the 1860 “Calamus”. The connection between the “Calamus” and the “Drum-Taps” clusters, therefore, is central to Whitman’s articulation of US democracy in *Leaves of Grass* throughout his entire life.

In “Drum-Taps”, Whitman continued “sing[ing] the idea of all”, constructing a poetic “I” that celebrated the unity of America and, at the same time, the specific “songs” of each of the states configuring such nationality: “To the north”, “Kanada” (“till I absorb Kanada in myself”, the poet adds, expansively), “Michigan”, “Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota”, “To Ohio and Indiana”, “to Missouri and Kansas and Arkansas”, “To Tennessee and Kentucky, to the Carolinas and Georgia”, “To Texas and so along up toward California” (“From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird”, 1973: 284).<sup>21</sup> The adhesive character of the poetic “I” embodying the voice of Unionism, like that of “Calamus”, mixes with expansionist tendencies in its democratic supplications. It is an “I” that yearns for “the Western world one and inseparable” (“Paumanok”, 284), for “the Identity formed out of thirty-eight spacious and haughty States, (and many more to come,)” (“Song of the Banner at Daybreak”, 284), and even for “Kanada” (“Paumanok”, 284). The patriotic voice singing to the Union in the first poems of “Drum-Taps”, however, soon changes its tone as readers are brought closer to the human tragedy of war and the focus of the poems shifts

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<sup>21</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all citations to the poems in this section are to “Drum-Taps”.

from patriotic exultation to individual tragedies which the poet movingly portrays. Like in “Calamus”, Whitman’s descriptions of marching soldiers and of the wounded are permeated with homoeroticism and with homosexual desire: the ecstatic contemplation of “brown-faced men” in “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” (300), or the poet’s prayer “give me comrades and lovers by the thousand! / Let me see new ones every day—let me hold new ones by the hand every day” in “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun” (313). This homoeroticism, nevertheless, Jerome Loving has argued, is different from the homoerotic yearnings in “Calamus”: “In *Drum-Taps* Whitman revived the old ‘Calamus’ idea of male friendship, now lacing the poems with expressions of empathy instead of the earlier romantic longing that is today viewed as homoerotic” (1997: 81). It is significant that, in his descriptions of these men, Whitman avoids partisanship, carefully refusing to describe the soldiers he depicts either as Unionists or as Confederates. This willingness not to connect individuals to either of the confronted sides in the conflict reinforces the fact that the consequences of the war affect, equally and without distinction, all men in the two armies. Adam Bradford has noted the irony in Whitman’s willingness to individualize unknown soldiers yet without reclaiming their identities:

Just as he had done for his own “self” in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman constructed *Drum-Taps* to act as a repository for the bodies of the lost soldiers of the Civil War, a repository which, by virtue of its status as a textual commodity, could circulate throughout the populace and carry those bodies —previously lost and left on the battlefield— home to be reclaimed by a loving readership. However, the challenge of embodying the “Million Dead, Too, Summ’d Up” in text required a more radical literary construction than even *Leaves of Grass* had —one which, ironically, eventually resulted in Whitman stripping Civil War soldiers, wounded and dead, of the identities that marked them as unique, irreplaceable human beings. (2010: 130)

At the same time, this de-individualization, paradoxically, has a powerful democratic individualizing component. By refusing to specify such a basic identity distinction in the war years as “Unionist” or “Confederate”, Whitman empowered readers who had lost relatives or friends to either side of the war to appropriate these heroic wounded, dying, or simply marching men:

In the absence of markers of identity, the poetic soldiers became reflections of a reader’s mind —constructions that were at the very least intimate mental projections from the reader’s own consciousness, and likely corresponded to actual individuals in the material world with whom the reader could now imaginatively connect. For many readers, both in the North *and* in the South, it was a powerfully recuperative

process and worked to connect them to their dead soldiers, and, given the mediating presence of his narratorial “I,” to Whitman himself. [...] The genius of his poetic project in *Drum-Taps* is his recognition that by stripping away the particulars of names, dates, and places associated with his specimen-soldier, virtually any reader —Northerner or Southerner— could impress the text with his or her own soldier image in need of “appreciation,” and see that “appreciation” enacted through Whitman’s speaker in the larger text. (Bradford, 2010: 139)

Not only did Whitman impose himself the task of healer and connector of readers-civilians and soldiers, but so did he aim to become a mediator between the before and after in US history that, he thought, the Civil War would signify, a “chansonnier of a great future”, as the poet referred to the poetic voice in “The Centenarian’s Story” (Whitman, 1973: 299). This uniting and reconciling function was closely related to Whitman’s experiences in the hospitals —at the core of “Drum-Taps”—, which he perceived as exemplifying his ideal society of comrades, and therefore his ideal of American democracy as he had expressed it in “Calamus”. In his Preface to “Two Rivulets” for the edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in commemoration of the US Centennial in 1876, the poet would vindicate the political relevance of adhesiveness as articulated in “Calamus” and “Drum-Taps”:

important as they are in my purpose as emotional expressions for humanity, the special meaning of the “Calamus” cluster of “Leaves of Grass,” (and more or less running through the book, and cropping out in “Drum-Taps,”) mainly resides in its political significance. In my opinion, it is by a fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west —it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it, that the United States of the future, (I cannot too often repeat,) are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal’d into a living union”. (1964: 471)

The poems in *Drum-Taps* feature nurturing moments of togetherness and silences full of powerful emotional intensity between the poet, those dead, dying or severely wounded soldiers, and the readers; episodes, moments, fragments which are based on the tasks Whitman himself performed for the soldiers in the hospitals. In “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night”, for example, the poet adopts the persona of a soldier caring for his dying, and eventually dead, comrade (a “son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)” [Whitman, 1973: 304]), for whom he keeps vigil and whose body he finally buries in the fields. Whitman’s nursing function is further expanded in poems such as “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown”, which describes

the human drama inside a church transformed into an improvised hospital field. The poetic “I”, a soldier, stops by this hospital, describing “a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made” (305), and nurses a dying soldier in danger of bleeding to death, before continuing with his mandatory march. Like Whitman himself, the poetic “I” is not a doctor who may provide the needed medical attention to the wounded soldier, still, his compassionate gestures give peace to the dying man: “But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile gives he me, / Then the eyes close, calmly close, and I speed forth to the darkness” (306). Whitman’s description of nursing hospital tasks reaches its pathos in “The Wound-Dresser”, a central piece to “Drum-Taps” in all its editorial variations, and which evokes Whitman’s nursing attentions toward the wounded in the hospitals. Not a soldier but a hospital nurse this time who “speed[s] forth to the darkness” of such overwhelming human drama, the poetic “I” portrays the sights, smells and sounds the real Whitman experienced in the hospitals of Washington, warning the reader “Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart” (310): “Each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss”, “I am faithful, I do not give out, / The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen, / These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame)” (310-311). Much suffering infuses the heart of the nursing “I” (and of the witnessing readers), but so do beautiful rewarding moments of love and of interpersonal bonding in the middle of the tragedy: “(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, / Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips)” (311). Whitman’s poems of anonymous men memorialize the unknown dead and wounded. At the roots of his poems lies the impulse of individualizing the heroic individuals (and of universalizing their sacrificial condition):

Curious I halt and silent stand,  
 Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the  
 blanket;  
 Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-gray’d hair, and  
 flesh all sunken about the eyes?  
 Who are you my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—and who are you my child and darling?  
 Who are you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful  
 yellow-white ivory;  
 Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of the Christ  
 himself,  
 Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies. (306-307)

Such nursing acts of comforting, caring, accompanying in death, being-with, individualizing, healing, and giving peace, enable Whitman to validate his democratic project of adhesive love as the healing remedy to the bleeding nation, in an effort to reconcile neighborly hatreds and fraternal divisions: for example, in “Reconciliation”, the poet describes a dead rival, neutralizing the differences between himself and the “enemy” and emphasizing their common, uniting, humanity: “For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead” (321). This enables the poet to reconcile and forget rivalries through an act of interpersonal love that transcends inter-personal divisions: “I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near, / Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin” (321). In “To the Leaven’d Soil They Trod”, the final poem closing “Drum-Taps” since the original 1865 edition, Whitman stresses the unifying component of his poetry, claiming to absorb the nation, East and West, and specially North and South: celebrating “peace restored” at the end of the war, “I calling sing” to the different states and regions and to nature, “And responding they answer all” (327). The two lines closing the volume emphasize Whitman’s wish to unite Northern and Southern neighbors in a kind of pantheistic fusion: “The Northern ice and rain that began me nourish me to the end, / But the hot sun of the South is to fully ripen my songs” (327).

Whitman considered that he had had a privileged insight into the true nature of America and Americans in the hospitals (“For who except myself has yet conceiv’d what your children en-masse really are?” [“Long, Too Long America”, 312]), and he desired to teach it to the rest of American society with his poems. Whitman’s direct reference to adhesiveness in the 1860 “Calamus” becomes explicit in “Drum-Taps” through the poem “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice”,<sup>22</sup> in which the visionary poetic voice asserts that “affection shall solve the problems of freedom”, and encourages his readers—the “Sons of the Mother of All”—to “Be not dishearten’d” (315). Such affection or adhesiveness, the poetic “I” claims, is the principle that shall guarantee democracy: “The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers, / The continuance of Equality shall be comrades”, claiming that “These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron” (316). Whitman infuses such connecting power onto his own being, proclaiming himself a prophet—and vehicle—of adhesiveness: “I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you” (316). The adhesive poet expresses his firm belief in the potential democratizing power of such vision, in the capacity of love as the only means to bind Americans and heal the nation after the “carnage”. He clings to the necessity of embarking in such project, yet, at the same time, confesses the uncertainty of the future: “Dear camerado! I confess I have urged you onward with me, and still urge you, without the least idea what is our

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<sup>22</sup> In their critical edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett have noted that this poem was originally from the 1860 “Calamus” cluster and was moved to “Drum-Taps” in 1865 (1973: 315).

destination, / Or whether we shall be victorious, or utterly quell'd and defeated” (“As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado”, 322).

Whitman’s personal commotion caused by the hatreds and the confronted neighborhoods in his country led him to undertake the task of unifier and reconciler at a time of critical national divisions culminating in civil war. In both “Calamus” and “Drum-Taps” Whitman vindicated adhesiveness as a principle that would bind the nation together and enable the construction of a social democracy based on the perfect equality among different Americans. If, in “Calamus”, Whitman had defined his ideal of American democracy and called for its materialization, in “Drum-Taps”, the poet would portray the adhesive love he saw as having been created in the particular context of a nation at war, in the middle of the death and suffering of the war hospitals. The 1865 “Drum-Taps”, therefore, continued the political project in the 1860 “Calamus”, arguing for adhesive love as the project that might give birth to a more truly democratic and humane America. Postbellum America, however, would not embrace the values that Whitman had called for, nor did his contemporaries welcome his democratic poetry. In the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman significantly dropped the line “—sure all will one day be accomplished” from the “Calamus” poem “Scented Herbage of my Breast”. It is impossible to know the reasons behind such editorial decision, yet if the author’s belief in the possibility of adhesiveness weakened at all in the last decades of his life, the fact that he did not remove, but, on the contrary, continued preparing his adhesive poems in “Calamus” and “Drum-Taps” alongside the literary legacy he expected to leave the world with *Leaves of Grass* indicates Whitman’s belief in the necessity to continue calling for such love as the only possible redemptive power. Yet, Whitman also seems to have been aware that the democratic potentiality of his message might, unfortunately, not arrive as promptly as he craved, as, in an almost desperate voice, he would continue imploring his country “to haste, haste on with me” (“Starting from Paumanok”, 28), while generously offering his invaluable, insistent and indefatigable message of interpersonal love to “Thou reader [who] throbbest life and pride and love the same as I” (“Thou Reader”, 15).

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