

If to be sympathetic to others is a prerequisite for harmonious community, how does this function in the absence of identities in common? In his figurations of sympathy as auto-poetic affectivity, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" offers a way, exceeding the humanist register on which much thinking about community relies.

## Poetic Connections: Sympathy and Community in Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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**F**ive hundred thousand iridescent bodies move as a co-ordinated phalanx in the Mid-Atlantic: mega-shoals of teleost fish. A swooping mass of starlings wheel over the fields at twilight. Above them, nebulae composed of glowing dust particles coherently present themselves to human eyes as stars. We cannot say if mackerel know anything of nebulae. But when we write and read about them, such formations elicit our sympathies. They are excruciatingly beautiful examples of how poorly we conceptualise the relationships of parts and wholes. It takes considerable effort to imagine any precise connection between the fishes, the starlings, and the cradles of the stars. They seem very distant from our conceptions of our own shoal, "our community."

"Our community"? Who is this "we"? Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" answers with maximum inclusivity: the carpenter, the prostitute, the prize-fighter, the red girl, the child, the runaway slave. In its desire to speak to, and for, the many different individuals of the American *en masse*, Whitman's song might just as happily have been titled "Symphony of all Others." Renowned for its immense optimism about the social

power of sympathy, it is an exuberant celebration of the “common people,” a refusal to countenance “a single person slighted or left away” (sec. 19). Declaring “I am he attesting sympathy” (sec. 22), the poem’s democratic and compassionate persona offers a remarkable catalogue of America’s diversity, moving from contralto to carpenter, duck shooter to deacon, culminating in the affirmation: “And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (sec. 15). Perhaps no other poet has aspired to contain such “multitudes” or to embrace a geography of selfhood that is so expansively drawn.

In light of the global rise of nationalisms and increasing hostility to cultural difference, it is timely to ask if Whitman’s concerns with inclusivity and sympathy remain relevant to our thinking about community today. To be sympathetic to the experiences of others may seem a fundamental prerequisite for dwelling harmoniously within a community. Yet when individuals occupy vastly different social realities and are neighbours only insofar as they fortuitously share space, is it plausible to appeal to fellow feeling or to holding identity “in common”? Beginning with a reflection on Whitman’s recourse to the rhetoric of sympathy in his pre-*Leaves of Grass* writing, I will explore how the desire to see oneself “in the place” of the other is both a key element in his reflections on community and the source of an essential dilemma: Is Whitman’s ambition to speak to and “for” all others in “Song of Myself” an imperialist prescription of homogeneity between humans? Does he inadvertently erase structural inequities and suppress the agency of the other? Building on the recent work of Jane Bennett, I will show that the modern notion of sympathy as “felt sentiment” is only one aspect of the sympathetic impetus of Whitman’s poetry, which also draws from a competing vitalist tradition of sympathy as external force of nature. To embrace a “community of poetic affects,” it will be necessary to return to Whitman’s catalogues to explore how, in this endlessly drifting form, a new thought of our own shoaling is found.

Whilst for some it seems a stretch of the imagination to connect mackerel and nebulae, in the avowedly democratic ante-bellum America it was equally difficult for many rational, moral citizens to connect black people, children, and democracy. As Alphonso Lingis has noted: “Community is usually conceived as constituted by a number of individuals having something in common—a common language, a common conceptual framework—and building something in common: a nation, a polis, an institution” (*Community* ix). The something in common may elude communication, as philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy and others have shown, but at the level of myth it has a lasting power. In the politically benevolent movements of Whitman’s day, the discourse of sympathy was integral to the building of a community of feeling. In a

typical example, the abolitionist Elizabeth Margaret Chandler implores her readers to sympathise with the plight of the slave by inviting them to “imagine themselves for a few moments in his very circumstances, . . . enter into his feelings, comprehend all his wretchedness, [and] transform themselves mentally into his very self” (qtd. in De Jong 1). If this act of emotional identification is secured, she avers, free citizens “would not long withhold their compassion” (1). Thus are communities of common sentiment born. The classic appeal to this effort of imagination is to be found in Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which as Mary G. De Jong notes, had been reprinted three times in northern American cities by 1822 (1). Smith argues that by “changing places in fancy with the sufferer” we come to be affected by what the sufferer feels and “become in some measure the same person with him” (8). By cultivating potent “fellow feeling” with the sufferer we go beyond mere pity and begin to “feel” the plight of the one condemned.<sup>1</sup>

In some striking moments in “Song of Myself,” Whitman takes this imaginative feat to its extreme. In the very long catalogue that makes up section 33 of the poem, Whitman’s “I” announces: “I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs.” Evoking the horror of pursuit and capture, the sympathising persona asserts: “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person” (sec. 33). This unequivocal identification with the suffering other coupled with an unshakeable faith in the ameliorative power of sympathy is a recurrent theme throughout Whitman’s work.<sup>2</sup> Involved in the anti-capital punishment movement primarily as a journalist in the 1840s, and from 1846 onwards as editor of *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Whitman published numerous pieces of his own writing advocating the abolition of hanging. Paul Christian Jones observes that the dominant tenor in these writings is emotional rather than rational: “he often asks his readers to feel for the criminals he is writing about, to identify sympathetically with them, and to imagine themselves in the place of these criminals” (4). In one such piece he beseeches his readers to imagine the dire condition of the malefactor in his prison cell and to remember that he is still “a duplicate of the humanity that stays in us all” (qtd. in Bennett, “Whitman’s” 610). Through he may be “seared in vice” (610), what the sinner shares with the virtuous is a core “human identity.”

However, as Whitman comments in another pre-*Leaves of Grass* publication, this appeal to what we hold in common may equally serve to divide us. Strong identification with the corporate identity of the state may inhibit individuals from conceiving of themselves as a criminal or imagining themselves in a wrongdoer’s place. In “A Dialogue,” an 1845 piece published in the *Democratic Review*, Whitman appears to question the way in which the concept of “community” serves the morality of the

mob. Casting his dialogue as a debate between an individual and society, Whitman points to the irony of the state sanctioning acts of retribution which, if committed by the individual, it would condemn as immoral. Should the criminal claim that society's demand for his death is as reprehensible as his own crime, the state invokes the authority of the common sentiment: "'The case is different,' rejoins society. 'We are a community—you are but a single individual'" (qtd. in Jones 9). As this example indicates, the concept of a common identity is deployed as readily in the service of the discriminatory politics of exclusion as within an egalitarian register. Indeed, sub-national forms of identification have graphically demonstrated this in the violent conflicts of both Whitman's time and our own. Yet Whitman's appeal to what we hold "in common" is more pragmatic than principled. In these political debates, he is quick to invoke a Christian rhetoric of sympathy when it serves the end of clemency for the transgressor. For this reason, when he aligns himself with "those antagonists of capital punishment who argued that sympathy was a necessary quality of being Christian" (8), his gesture reinforces his politics of sympathy rather than his commitment to Christian values.

A similar point might be made about Whitman's recourse to sentimentalism to "write" communities into being. As Stefan Schöberlein has claimed, the sentimental genre "creates feelings of community, moral righteousness, and belonging through affective storytelling, often deemed emotionally excessive" (453). By drawing on a repertoire of stock familial figures, rhetorical devices, and the arousal of pathos through various conventional scenarios, sentimental literature unites a readership around a common cause for compassion. Whitman's tale of the "runaway slave" with "sweated body" and "bruised feet" in section 10 of "Song of Myself" would be a paradigmatic example.<sup>3</sup> However, Schöberlein argues that in focusing on the morally right action and response, the sentimental tends to negate elements of structural violence such as racism, gender inequality, and poverty, highlighting in its stead the human story of one person's pain. Since sympathetic identification so affectively freighted evokes pity for the wretched of the earth, it has an uneasy tendency to "commodify suffering, especially of socially marginal figures, for consumption by a white middle-class readership" (454). In this connection, Kristin Boudreau has questioned the ethics of "Whitman's voracious sympathy for the slave," arguing that his effort to "enter into" the suffering of another is less about understanding another's feelings and more a matter of ensuring "that one's own are projected there" (84-85).

Boudreau's contention that Whitman's sympathetic identification seeks to "replace difference with similarity" (12) is not a new criticism. It was articulated in a series of essays by D.H. Lawrence, most trenchantly in his 1923 text in which he takes

Whitman to task for his appeal to Christian sympathy: “Whitman came along, and saw the slave, and said to himself: ‘That negro slave is a man like myself. We share the same identity. And he is bleeding with wounds. Oh, oh, is it not myself who am also bleeding with wounds?’ ... This was not *sympathy*. It was merging and self-sacrifice” (*Studies* 175). Objecting that Whitman’s identification with all things and all people reduces their differences to the “awful pudding of One Identity” (166), Lawrence sneers at Whitman’s closing line to section 15 of “Song of Myself”—“And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.” “Do you?” he retorts: “Well then, it just shows you haven’t *got* any self. It’s a mush, not a woven thing” (165). Elsewhere, Lawrence insists that Whitman wants to become in his own person “the whole world” (“Whitman” 128) and that he is in flight from the truth that each soul is unique “and never *other* than itself” (128): “As soon as Walt knew a thing, he assumed a One Identity with it. If he knew that an Eskimo sat in a kayak, immediately there was Walt being little and yellow and greasy, sitting in a kayak” (*Studies* 166).

As Karen Sánchez-Eppler points out, there is a conflict between Whitman’s multiple migratory “I” inhabiting the body of the other “in all its difference” (10) and his desire for poetic merger “which would encompass and negate all differences within his single swelling ‘I’” (10). When the suffering other is subsumed by the sympathetic identification of the subject, what gets lost is an appreciation of embodied difference: the facticity of race, gender, and disability that mark our individual material histories as distinct. Berating Whitman for not having a robust notion of “self,” for having allowed his own individual self to “leak out” in to the universe (*Studies* 165), Lawrence assumes the absolute primacy of the anthropic ideal to any discourse of sympathy. Nevertheless, as the racist stereotyping in Lawrence’s Eskimo example reveals, insisting on the principle of unique personhood is not in itself a sufficient condition for the recognition of embodied difference.

Perhaps personhood or even consciousness is an unhelpful starting point. Fireflies in synchrony, ant-hills in symbiosis with fungi, convection cells in the furnace of the sun: there is no shortage of other models via which we might re-think the vocabulary of sympathy and inclusion beyond the humanist principle of identity. As Bennett has shown, in many places in his writings Whitman gently inflects the moral sentimentalism of his time towards “an older, more bodily definition of sympathy as a physics or network of affinities between natural bodies” (“Whitman’s” 610). She describes how classical “natural philosophy” theorised sympathy as a force that “draws bodies together,” and shows how elements of these theories remained operative in nineteenth century culture under various guises including animal magnetism, mesmerism, and neuromimesis (607). On such a reading, sympathy as material force is

socially interiorised as moral “sentiment” whilst remaining continuous with a larger, extra human field of forces that transcends the “self” and our other species-parochial concepts of isolated, discrete “things.” We could go further and insist that the broader material networks and fluid systems in which human bodies inhere engender the more refined, psychological feelings of sympathy as such. It is pertinent to observe that the line in section 22 of “Song of Myself,” “I am he attesting sympathy,” is succeeded by the parenthetical and rhetorical question: “(Shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house / that supports them?)” (sec. 22) since the scaffolds of “support” that “house” the self and its concerns are endlessly vast. Rather than conceiving of the “self” of “Song of Myself” as an ever-swelling soul incorporating the universe, it could be imagined more economically as a temporary constellation of forces coursing through the world, an ever-shifting site of communication, attraction, and exchange.

Indeed, from its opening moments, the poem announces its elemental reach, a song of “nature without check with original energy” (sec.1). Grass, tongue, atom, blood, soil, air, parents: the poem is a hymn of praise to the sheer vitality of things. “Song of Myself” delights in the uttering of living material forces, without distinction between human and non-human, parts and wholes. Section 8 of the poem resounds with the music of the street, the talk of its wayfarers just another rhythm in the background hum of vibrant life:

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the  
promenaders,  
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the  
clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,  
The snow- sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls. (sec. 8)

Whitman’s song of the “impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes” enunciates a world in which “things” have lives of their own (sec. 8). Bits of the world are subtly attuned to each other and “communicate” both within and beyond strictly human communities. As Lingis suggests, “To live is to echo the vibrancy of things. To be, for material things, is to resonate” (96). Just as the opera singer sustains her note and the glass shivers, vibrates, and shatters, Whitman envisages a world “where human beings are positioned not as potential masters of, but as co-participants with, other bodies” (Bennett, “Solar” 136). As Bennett observes, human action is never exclusively a matter of human agency but is intimately connected to and dependent upon a panoply of forces, “from gravity to sunlight to bacteria to plastic to metals to plant matter, which act in concert and in conflict with us” (135).

This imbrication of self and world is vividly evoked in the “catalogue” that forms section 31 of “Song of Myself”: “I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss,

fruits, grains, / esculent roots, and am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over" (sec. 31). The material forces that course through coal, moss, and grains also animate the tongue and atoms of blood of the persona who is "form'd from this soil, this / air" (sec. 1). Such a radically non-anthropocentric vision has some obvious eco-political implications and is highly relevant in an era of climate change where there is a need to become much more alert to the interconnectivity of things whilst also relinquishing the notion of the unique entitlement of the human animal. As Cristin Ellis comments: "Ecosystemic collapse is unmistakably structural: it has no center, its flashpoints of suffering cannot be remedied in isolation but require concerted and simultaneous action on multiple fronts" (631). The humanist discourse of sympathy and inclusion is significantly reconfigured when seen through this lens. Sympathetic political action must retreat from a kind of localism of individuals and address structures and systems much more globally.

Ellis contends that rather than upholding the principle of my similarity to the other person, the broader thrust of Whitman's work emphasizes a *material* connection to that other being (631). However, as she also acknowledges, this reimagining of the world in terms of networks and flows rather than types or classes of individuals "is unable to account for the politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, or species difference that have been so critical to the democratic expansions—and the rhetoric of sympathy—of the last two centuries" (627). Struggles for inclusion have typically challenged the universalist ideologies that ignore the "matter" of different bodies. Despite Whitman's close attention to the physicality of identity, on Ellis's reading of Whitman, "embodied difference loses its significance" (631): "The interdependencies of onto-affectivity [...] remove me from the fiction of my identity and restore me to the entangled materiality Whitman refers to as 'the ocean of life,' but by this restoration, my life becomes immune to the individualizing political syntax of identity and difference, sympathy and recognition" (631). The worry is that in Whitman's vision individuals are "encroached upon, even subsumed" by myriad material forces and "our entanglement collapses the distance across which ethical recognition passes" (629). If Ellis is right that there is no place for Whitman's sympathies within the "individualizing political syntax of identity and difference," then the political stakes are high. The price of expanding sympathetic inclusion beyond the merely human is that we lose the political vocabulary of community as we know it.

It will not escape the reader that we seem to have returned to the dialectic of the "one and all" that so preoccupied Lawrence: *either* an identity politics of sympathy predicated on the recognition of sameness and difference ("I recognise a kinship with you although I will never know your pain") *or* a radical politics of interconnection

and merger (which reconfigures and dissolves boundaries between self and other). In both cases, difference is conceived as an object of representation in relation to some identity (the one and the all) and is never addressed in terms of its difference in itself. The assumption remains that Whitman's account of vital, non-moral sympathies configures a world as one identity, that there is at base a sameness against which variation can be measured or deduced. This is ultimately an onto-theological prejudice—the legacy of a western rationalist inheritance. What gets missed is a thinking of difference as *irreducible multiplicity*: differences which are not grounded in anything else and which do not resolve into a pre-existing unity. The challenge is to think sympathetic community without defaulting to a celebration of cosmic “oneness,” to become attuned to otherness outside the logic of the common.

The preeminent place for thinking about those who have “nothing in common” is section 15 of Whitman's “Song of Myself,” where in lines of beguiling simplicity a living map of the American *en masse* unfolds:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles  
     its wild ascending lisp,  
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanks-  
     giving dinner,  
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
 The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are  
     ready,  
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
 The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,  
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big  
     wheel,  
 The farmer stops by the bar as he walks on a First-day loafe and  
     looks at the oats and rye,  
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,  
 (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother's  
     bed-room;)

At first glance this catalogue of figures evokes a sentimental national symbolism which is reassuringly familiar. Traditional rural pursuits follow cameos of authentic labour and modest recreation until the poem turns to the “lunatic,” finally despatched to the asylum, leaving the bedroom of his mother forever. These deeply perturbing lines, amplified by the variation both in lineation and in verb tense, suggest coercion or, at the very least, lack of agency (Mullins 219). The difference here is not simply in

the use of the passive voice but in the harrowing future projection. Amid all the parallel present participles—reinforcing the busyness of farmers and singers and carpenters—this is a break in time: the future will not resemble the past. The fate of the lunatic is all the more affecting for being buttressed by the tales of the well-occupied and industrious. And yet the catalogue rolls on, proliferating images of the prosaic and the tragic, minor moments of individual lives, strikingly juxtaposed. Although the section closes with the line so deplored by Lawrence—“And of these one and all I weave the song of myself”—the migrant “I” is held in abeyance throughout. There is no “inhabiting” of the other, no absorbing of all difference, yet by the same token, at no point is it obvious how these vast lists of people and activities are to be “read” or what they might mean to a sympathising ego. With this catalogue Whitman presents a symphony without a conductor, a proliferation of differences without any overarching principle of coherence or identity.

As Schöberlein notes, the catalogue differs from the traditional sentimentalist text for it lacks the “narrative anchor of having clear-cut causes and solutions already provided by a coherent, moralistic storyline for these moments of suffering” (“From Many” 465). The plight of the lunatic or the prostitute or the quadroon girl “sold at the auction-stand” might arrest the reader but the presence of such figures in these startling lists frustrates the stock expectations and responses associated with the sentimentalist genre. In these catalogues, Schöberlein suggests, “there is rarely any time to reflect or pronounce judgment—life just marches on, regardless: the ‘machinist rolls up his sleeves. . . . the policeman travels his beat. . . . the gate-keeper marks who pass” (465). In a similar vein, Brian Folker suggests that the “forward momentum” of the catalogue “has us moving so quickly” that one cannot pose critical questions of how sympathy is at work (5). Kenneth Burke admits to skimming the catalogues “as when running the eye down the column of a telephone directory” (97), whereas John Mason says that the reader skims in the hope of finding connectives to yoke together the “onrush of apparently disconnected images” (45). Whitman’s excesses seem to overwhelm these readers, his lists inhibiting any easy sympathetic response. It is not imperative, though, that readers hurtle through the catalogues with indecent haste and it is equally possible to slow the tempo. Bennett contends that Whitman believed that sympathy could do “real political work” and in this context she identifies his technique of “doting”—“paying slow attention to ordinary objects, things, shapes, words, bodies”—as a move towards addressing the inequalities and injustices of his day (“Whitman’s” 615). Bennett proposes that “Whitman’s use of catalogues is itself a practice of doting upon an outside: the lists with their creative juxtapositions of items prime the reader’s receptivity to the startlingly vital presence of every thing” (615).

But fast or slow? Object, shapes, things? When Whitman's bombastic "I" retreats, his readers puzzle over how to hear his song. Just what Whitman is doing with these lists has captivated and bemused his admirers, with many seeing the syntax of the catalogues as integral to thinking sympathy. For example, Robert Belknap argues that "For Whitman the list offered opportunities to experiment with form, provided platforms on which to display his broad sympathy with his fellow Americans, and facilitated the elaboration of different ways of conceiving the relation of the individual to the surrounding world" (119). Since Whitman's catalogues favour coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions (Grossman 69-70), the relations of individuals to the world of the poem are far from obvious. Belknap, for example, recognises that section 15 of "Song of Myself" presents the "intriguing proximate juxtaposition of a prostitute with the president," and ponders whether the connection is merely phonetic or whether a more political comment is being made on "the extremes" of American lives: "Does the speaker intend to indicate parity or disparity, the equality of citizens or the inequality across the span of society?" (89). With greater conviction, Folker deems the "unlikely pairings," which are typical of the catalogue as a whole, an illustration of "the all inclusiveness of both the poet's vision and the one life" (5). However, this recourse to the problematic notion of the "one life" prompts a further question: "Does everything in the list have the same moral status?" (5).

This question is a significant one for our understanding of sympathetic community for as we have already discussed, critics of Whitman take him to task for rendering all differences equivalent and for failing to "grant" a voice to the "not Me Myself" (Claviez 1777). Thomas Claviez cites Wai Chee Dimock's assertion that "with its endless catalogs, its endless collections of attachable, detachable parts, one as good as the other, one substitutable for the other" (1776), Whitman's commitment to democracy is merely formal. Yet however levelling and "democratic" Whitman's refusal of subordination might be, subtle differences in the verbal formulation of the catalogue abound, the lunatic example being just one. Folker worries in particular over the lines detailing the prostitute, whose parenthetical rebuke to the mob imposes a break in the onrushing flow of images:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy  
and pimpled neck,  
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink  
to each other,  
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;) (sec. 15)

According to Folker, this reproach to those who mock (the only parenthetical aside in the whole poem in its original 1855 form) imposes a break in the poetic flow that carries with it a risk: when we “pause to consider the conditions of the poet’s sympathy for the prostitute” our faith in “the one life” is undermined (5): “We see that Whitman has broken his visionary progress in order to extend his sympathy to a lone individual. But to extend his sympathy to the prostitute, must Whitman *withdraw* it from the crowd that torments her? Does such withdrawal of sympathy imply a moral condemnation of the mob?” (5)

Such digressions also preoccupy Belknap, who speculates whether “certain representations of life require greater or lesser definition” (90) and whether “there [is] a difference in sympathy corresponding to the difference in verbal exactitude” (90). What all these questions have in common is their appeal to abstractions of form, whether to the relation of parts to wholes or the one and the many. In the absence of a notion of what is “common” to the catalogue—be that a principle of one identity or a sympathising ego—it is unclear how, or indeed if, the disparate images connect. It is not even certain, for example, that it is the “poet” rather than the “prostitute” who condemns the braying hoard. There is a sense in which these questions default to issues of representation, asking what it might mean to be different *from* others within a system which presupposes the principle of identity.

As with the prostitute, the vignette of the lunatic is a divergence within the material flow of the poem which occasions a pause for thought. Paul Jaussen acknowledges that “The parenthetical aside tears the lunatic from the category of ‘all madmen,’ and transforms the term into a moment of particularity: *this* lunatic. For not all lunatics sleep in cots in their mother’s bedroom, and that detail, suggesting a complex family drama, refines the paratactic focus, shifting the poem from the representative to the deictic, creating a pointing gesture, not an idealization” (63). The fate of the lunatic is not representative of anything: his case is singular and unique, just as the prostitute’s actions aggress against the stereotyping that consigns her to easy derision. In contrast to the sentimentalist rhetoric Whitman knowingly deployed in his egalitarian arguments, the “other” in section 15 of “Song of Myself” is never one with whom I might exchange places. Jaussen insists that “The ensemble, for Whitman, acknowledges each part as an individual, in which no part can be substituted by or for another” (*Writing* 52). The refusal of parts here is understood as a refusal of representative emblems, “metonymic replacements by which one element stands in for everything else” (52). Section 15 celebrates the uniqueness implicit in particularity as such, not particularity as an aspect of a pre-existing whole.

But we could go further still. Folker highlights that the one and only parenthesis in the 1855 version of “Song of Myself” is a visual event for someone reading the

poem rather than listening to it being read (6), a welcome disruption, we might suppose, to those impatient readers inclined to “skim.” More compelling, however, is the fact that the “form” of this aside impacts in ways which are not simply reducible to the “content” of what it represents. The extra lines given to the micro-narrative of the prostitute cause the rhythm to stagger, something that is perceived below a threshold of immediate awareness when the poem is *performed* for a listener. The moment may be memorable because we hear a resistant voice (“I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you”) but it is also provoking because it is *felt* as a change in the beat of the poem. This is something that happens “outside” of representation. Just as the prostitute’s voice of condemnation disturbs the flow of third person naming, the lunatic’s plight disrupts the present tense of work and industry. These social outcasts capture our attention because we feel a deviation in the rhythm of things. When we move away from questioning what the poem represents and attend to how its shifts in poetic gear are materially experienced, we begin to see how Whitman’s notion of non-moral, non-personal sympathy comes to the fore.

As Robert Creeley has observed, “there is a great deal of syntactic ‘rhyming’ in Whitman’s poetry, insistently parallel syntactic structures which themselves make a strong web of coherence” (290-91). This is complemented by “parallelism in the nature of what is being thought and/or felt as emotion” which can serve to “increase the experience of coherence in the statement the poem is working to accomplish” (291). The lineation in section 15 of “Song of Myself” is malleable but the iteration of the definite article invests the poem with subtle incantatory power. When this rhythm falters in the lines detailing the lunatic or the prostitute, it resonates with physiological forces beyond conscious reach. Whitman’s poem does not simply make us “see” the confluence of humans in vast, non-human networks, *it impels us to feel a sympathy* with extra-human flows.

Where do these thoughts take us in terms of rethinking community today? I would like to draw these ideas together in relation to an empirical example of sympathetic community, gifted to me by close experience of sharing Whitman’s poetry with women’s groups in my local area.<sup>4</sup> Participants in the groups had no previous encounter with Whitman’s work yet they found the experience of reading the poetry aloud, and performing it collectively, a revelation. As a group they became entranced by the power of Whitman’s simple naming: “I am satisfied – I see, dance, laugh, sing” (sec. 3). It was not simply the case that specific lines proved meaningful to individuals, although this certainly occurred. The contagious laughter and joy provoked by hearing to Whitman’s song was the more intriguing discovery. Speaking of her experience, one woman stressed the primacy of the affective over the symbolic: “I’ve really

enjoyed reading Walt Whitman's poems. We've had a right laugh reading some of them and some of them have a lot of meaning [...] I've been going through a lot of depression and something like this makes me feel happy." This revitalization through performance was magical. Something profound was being shared: not the sentiments of subjects but the startling reverberations of embodied forces. Beyond the words and their interpretations there was an attunement to trans-individual affects that rippled through the group. A kind of blood music, the drift and pull of Whitman's rhythms summoned a community of material sympathy in to being.

To have poetic relations to others is to connect to currents and tides which are seldom noticed but which traverse the boundaries of human communities all the time. For Whitman the world is already poetic—already political—because the world is already “speaking.” Nature is not mute: it is we who are selectively deaf. “Song of Myself” reminds us that a re-tuning of our attentions and sensitivities is not only possible but is already a committed bio-political action. This is not to anthropomorphise nature. Quite the contrary: unless we default to grossly anthropomorphic theology, we must grant that human communities learned song via their sympathies with the flows, rhythms, and ruptures of the non-human world. The art forces of the world bring poetry to the human and not the other way around.

With the catalogue form, Whitman finds a way to solicit material sympathies, to galvanize communities of feeling not easily assimilated to our prevailing intellectual habits. Just as the “tires of carts” and “sluff of boot-soles” resonate with the “impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes” (sec. 8), the deep physiological rhythms of readers and listeners resonate with the syntax of Whitman's words. This is matter sympathising with matter, the poem itself a product of “my respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and / air through my lungs” (sec. 2). Beyond fellow feeling for a suffering other, it is in our attunement to “the blab of the pave” that sympathetic communities are fostered; in the song of the outside in the midst of which we speak.

This is a challenge to the concept of political community traditionally conceived, for it includes both the human and non-human, and as a constantly shifting field of “otherness” it embraces elusive sensations and subtle sensibilities. As Ellis writes, “the argument for a radically inclusive political community has as much to do with recognizing the objecthood of humans as it does with sensing the sympathetic subjecthood or humanity of nonhumans” (631). Whitman's dynamic and open system of forces contains multitudes and is vaster and more fluid than the marketplace notion of community which dominates so much thinking about democracy. In the latter, selves are interchangeable units, individual beads on the abacus of capitalist accountability, but

it is only as conveyors of abstract information that persons are interchangeable. In section 15 of “Song of Myself” there is no common measure for being in common, no suggestion of a single thing within which separate individualities are accommodated. Sympathetic communities are found elsewhere: “Our singularity and our indefinite discernibility is found in, and is heard in, our outcries and our murmurs, our laughter and our tears: the noise of life” (Lingis 92).

Irrespective of whether we consciously acknowledge the stars, the sun, electromagnetic fields, seasons, storms, rolling tides, and the air and food sources they give rise to, their forces transect and infiltrate human communities and politics in innumerable ways. “Song of Myself” provides resources for sensing and thinking “sympathy” beyond the impasses of community understood as a “commonality” distributed among separate individuals, a commonality which stunts “sympathy” into sentimental humanism, while also avoiding the outcome Lawrence feared—that of turning everything into a mystical Cosmic mush that merges with an abstract “One.” Beyond the more overt attestations of sympathy in “Song of Myself,” there is a sympathetic community at work in the ever-shifting differential relations of Whitman’s song. It is the cross-currents of inhuman forces which constitute each fortuitous “I”—“all just as immortal and fathomless as myself” (sec. 7). Whitman’s controversial assertion at the close of section 15—“And of these one and all I weave the song of myself”—is prefaced by the more equivocal: “And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.” Interestingly, this decisive rejection of a “self,” enthroned upon the abstractions of identity, was the closing line of the section until the revisions of 1881-82. The community in which this “more-or-less-I” lives should also be thought of as outside the grammatical mirage of either singular or plural.

Indeed, with this line Whitman resists the assumption that community presupposes identity. It is at best a “more or less” and never a sameness. It is this fundamental incommensurability that the poem affirms. Whitman’s song (and Whitman’s self) are not the arithmetical total of all the things he describes in his poetry, atoms of individuality adding up to a “community.” Community, as Whitman helps us to see it, is forged of irreducible otherness. It has no need of a shared fantasy of national identity to sustain it. The man who has been confirmed as a “lunatic” and carried to the asylum is not an obvious member of a community. Nor is the quadron girl sold at the auction stand, nor the opium eater, nor the prostitute who is jeered and laughed at by the crowd. Nor, perhaps, the president. This is a community of those who have nothing in common.

Whitman does not ask us to take a God’s eye view. “Song of Myself” invites us to multiply our attentions to differences great and small: between “oats and rye,” “lance

and harpoon,” “the married and the unmarried children,” prostitutes, presidents, spinning-girls, slaves. At a cosmic level it may be that the differences between the highest and lowest elements count for no more than the thickness of a butterfly’s wing, or that any future poetic Utopia will be only infinitesimally more harmonious than the slave-states of Babylon or Alabama. But still, Whitman reminds us, we live in a world where specific bodies and differentials of power require our close attention. And still there are fish in the ocean and stars in the sky.

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#### NOTES

- 1/ Smith supplies copious examples of sympathetic feelings that go beyond the merely imagined (e.g., “persons of delicate fibres and weak constitution of body” are apt to complain of an itching or uneasy sensation in their own bodies when they see “the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets” [Smith 9]). However, his fundamental point is that ultimately we can never know another person’s pain.
- 2/ Whitman asserts in 1864 that his hospital visits to the casualties of the civil war confirmed the magnetic power of sympathy: “To many of the wounded and sick, especially the youngsters, there is something in personal love, caresses and the magnetic flood of sympathy and friendship, that does, in its way, more good than all the medicine in the world. [...] Many will think this merely sentimentalism, but I know it is the most solid of facts. I believe that even the moving around among the men, or through the ward, of a hearty, healthy, clean, strong, generous-souled person, man or woman, full of humanity and love, sending out invisible, constant currents thereof, does immense good to the sick and wounded” (“Our Wounded”).
- 3/ Schöberlein also comments that Whitman’s temperance novel, *Franklin Evans*, is “full of tear-jerking scenes of dying children and women, exploited youths, crying mothers, and abusive drunkards” (457).
- 4/ This was part of a community outreach project, “Writing Bolton,” organized by the English Studies team at the University of Bolton (2016-20). Over a period of several months, our team shared Whitman’s work with the local “Wonder Women” group. They talk about their experiences at [youtu.be/cM5DLD6MF3k](https://youtu.be/cM5DLD6MF3k).

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