



## A CRISIS IN THE BODY Whitman's Sexual Connecting Disconnection<sup>1</sup>

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Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* has long been recognized as a central text in understanding the process of or continuing debates over American identity formation. Prior to the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, American identity is marked by religious intolerance and oppressive institutionalized slavery two recurring themes that suffocate its nascent history. Instead of embracing Crèvecoeur's claim that Americans are "the scattered poor of Europe, the persecuted," Whitman asserts his vision for a distinctly American union. Indeed it is in Whitman's poetic experience that readers locate his understanding of American identity. For Whitman, identities were predicated on his understanding of American democracy, and his insistence that this system of government and social organization was more than a guiding political principle. Therefore, his particular brand of democratic vision came in the form of unifying bodies; it is his sense of hope for the separated union of the nineteenth-century that distinguishes Whitman's poetry as tantamount in shaping American identity. For example, he writes in "I Sing the Body Electric"

The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred  
. . . it is not matter who

Is it the slave?  
Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on the wharf?  
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the welloff. . . just as  
much as you,  
Each has his place in the procession [Whitman: 122].

The convergence of man, woman, slave, and immigrant in these lines suggest the poet's belief in unifying all American bodies, a belief essential in the larger project. Moreover, it is with this conviction of the sacredness of the body and its connections [sexually and literally] to other bodies that we can initiate a query regarding the sexualized-erotic body and its significance for the poetic project that undertakes to unify and to, in essence, define Americans.

Flesh of the body, flesh touching flesh, bodies on bodies, using the body to connect with others: all of these phrases are objects of inquiry in many poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman scholarship tends to contain direct discourse of the body—its functions, pleasures, potentialities, and

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limitations—focusing instead on Whitman as the democratic poet.<sup>2</sup> Although Whitman's poetry stands for many political causes, he advocates primarily for celebrating the body, and if we remove the ideological questions from Whitman's poetry then we engage questions regarding the body. The democratic vision remains, yet in the form of the unification of erotic bodies. These bodies represent a source of agency. Moreover, he constructs these multiple bodies within the poetry so that the body unites with the soul. In other words, the body is sexualized and engages in erotic activity, and the connection of erotic bodies allows the body and soul to become one because the union of bodies constitutes a spiritual connection.

Whitman's poetry reveals a major sexual and spiritual crisis in the nineteenth-century. This historical crisis engages philosophical concerns regarding the divide between the mind and the body. The poetry selections in this essay locate the crisis and illustrate the poet's response to this enlightenment conviction as he undertakes to unite the body and the soul.<sup>3</sup> Whitman theorizes that the erotic (sexualized) body and spirituality are connected, that the sexual is the spiritual because bodies need other bodies to reach a state of spiritual connection. Critics such as Vivian Pollak account for Whitman's erotic body by linking "Whitman's critique of American sexual ideology and practice to the underlying anxieties of his personal life".<sup>4</sup> Even though Pollak engages an erotic body, she and others do not discuss the poet's need for the erotic body and its unity with other bodies to achieve a spiritual connection. Thus this paper repairs the failure of recognizing Whitman's poetic project only as a political vision for America; it explains the central role of the erotic body in the shaping of American identity in the nineteenth century.

In order for Whitman to forge a connection between the body and soul, we must understand him broadly in the context of being a democratic poet, and also see the centrality of an erotic body in the quest for unification. Yet, his poetry reveals an erotic and spiritual body that experiences tension. Indeed, his romantic optimism demonstrates the hope that the powers of the erotic body will enable him to connect with the world. The poet faces a crisis upon realizing the limits of the body in its attempt to love sexually, and its decimation by war, which in turn complicates his ability to connect spiritually with other bodies. A spiritual connection occurs at that moment in Whitman's text when erotic bodies and souls unite. This unity of bodies arrives in touch, in sex, in fluid desire, or in the fantasy of all these things. That is, the poet bears witness to bodies, and the poetic body becomes sexually aroused in the text. The sexual erotic body is an agent of fluid

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<sup>2</sup> Part and parcel of democratic poetry's roots are in American ideology (Oerlemans: 704). Onno Oerlemans' article, "Whitman and Erotics of Lyric," proclaims that if literary texts are read and analyzed with ideologies like democracy in mind, then the poem's meaning is stifled and often misrepresented. Oerlemans' article invokes Philip Fisher's larger point that an ideology of representation is operating, which Jefferson and Whitman conceive as they way in which American democracy functions.

<sup>3</sup> Whitman uses body and soul interchangeably with body and spirit. This essay similarly uses mind and body interchangeably with body and soul.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Erotic Whitman*. Pollak's argument limits Whitman's use of an erotic body as a means to overcome personal fears regarding intimacy. Pollak understands Whitman's views of sexuality only in relation to his homosexual desire and its projection onto a vision of democratic love for America.

desire and it passes in and out, to and from ecstasy. This state of ecstasy or transcendence inhabits Whitman's spirituality [Killingsworth: 14].<sup>5</sup>

Whitman experiences desire productively with his erotic and spiritual body, which is similar to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's presentation of desire in their critical piece, *The Anti-Oedipus*, as an entity that constantly produces other desires.<sup>6</sup> For Whitman the erotic body needs reciprocity, or it needs contact with another desiring body in order to achieve a spiritual connection. As in Deleuze and Guattari, in Whitman's poetry the productive desires are fluid. The fluidity between corporeal bodies transforms the body into an entity that produces multiple desires. This fluidity of desire defies definition because it is something that constantly moves. The mixing, melting, productive desires of bodies are multiple and changing. In Whitman's text the fluidity of desire necessarily encompasses physical sex, sexual fantasy, and masturbation. Thus, a new crisis arises when Whitman realizes the limits of the body. Initially, the crisis is metaphysical, but in the later poems the crisis becomes physical and concrete as the poet cannot literally connect with other bodies.

The first stage of Whitman's poetry reveals an open, fluid, eroticized body capable of achieving a spiritual state of ecstasy. A celebratory and open body is initiated in the "Introduction" of *Leaves of Grass* and sections of "Song of Myself." These sections privilege the body, its functions and beauties. In addition, the body is erotically connecting with other bodies in a sexualized manner. For example, "I Sing the Body Electric," showcases the erotic body as a fluid entity that experiences a spiritual state of ecstasy through its sexual connections. The "swimmers naked in the swimmingbath, and the bending forward and backward of rowers in rowboats" reveal an intense attention to the body. Moreover, the poet observes, "hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands—all diffused—loveflesh swelling and deliciously aching, limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous...quivering jelly of love...white blow and delirious juice" [Whitman: 251], all of which attest to an eroticized sexual moment in the text. Consequently, the poetic body transforms into an entity that produces multiple desires. This connection meets danger in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," as the poet notes, "the way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive" [Whitman: 270]. These words represent warning signs that correspond to the limits of the body. The second stage arrives in two poems from the "Drum-Taps" series. The poetic project of openness and fluidity in erotic bodies is disrupted by the War and thus the poet is unable to achieve ecstasy. Instead a religious emptiness fills the poems. The poems that expose this disruption are "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," and "the Wound-dresser." Both poems engage wounded soldiers from the Civil War. The poet struggles with the wounded

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<sup>5</sup> Even Killingsworth does not explain how or why Whitman restores a spiritual connection. I argue that a spiritual connection is achieved with the poet's erotic body connecting with other bodies. Moreover, Killingsworth omits an explanation of why Whitman's spirituality turns religious and sexually empty by 1867 [14]. By the end of the revision period Whitman's move toward a spiritual source of energy, rather than a sexually charged body made his poetry less radical.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari provide a way to situate this reading of Whitman's desire and sexuality in the poems. This is distinct from Vivian Pollak, and other critics who tend to use psychoanalytic, New Historicist, and feminist lenses.

because he is unable sexually, and thus spiritually, to connect with them. After reading and writing the body as a sophisticated tool toward an end that involves a spiritual expansion in the form of a democratic vision of love—all bodies and sexualities connecting—one sees Whitman's challenge to connect, despite other fleeting connections throughout the poems.

### *A Poetic Response to the Split between Mind and Body*

Whitman's conception of the mind/body division—prior to the inception of these poems—operates analogously to the history of thought informing him. He empowers the body in the "Introduction" of the 1855 edition when he says, "Dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body" [Whitman: 11]. The body is central to his project of attaining connectedness, as the poet seeks, in Aspiz's assessment, to "inculcate a spiritually centered sexual self and to establish new, purer sexual mores as initiatory steps toward a spiritual order" [Aspiz: 2]. It is crucial to point out that Whitman reacts to this historical crisis surrounding the split between mind and body with a poetic project that strives to restore a division, but which employs an erotic body.

In his "Introduction," we sense the majesty of the body. The elevation of the body indicates that with it the soul can reach fulfillment, and that the function of the body is to "bring or [B]ring? the spirit of any or all events and passions and scenes and persons some more and some less to bear on your individual character as you hear or read. Past and present are not disjointed but joined" [Whitman: 13]. The poet begins to restore the historic divide between mind and body by using the elevated body's power to join body and soul.<sup>7</sup> An energy exists in the body and it passes to and from other bodies and into and out from the soul. He says, "The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body" [Whitman: 21], suggesting the poet's belief that the body and soul have to be connected. The body generates energy and the exchange of energy among bodies demonstrates the need for reciprocity to form a spiritual connection. A spiritual connection is a necessary component of his democratic vision, and he needs bodies to connect.

Just as Whitman reveals his conception and function of the body in the "Introduction," traces of this constructed self are evident in key sections of "Song of Myself".<sup>8</sup> After he conceives this body, it then transforms into visceral moments of exchange among bodies. These exchanges provide the rationale behind the erotic and homoerotic motivation compelling the

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<sup>7</sup> Whitman's poetic project responds to two centuries of American identity as shaped by religious intolerance [Puritanism] and the political discourse of the revolutionary era. His claim that past and present are joined exemplifies his contribution to the process of Americanization as well as his hope for creating the language of the quotidian in America.

<sup>8</sup> Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, Section 21 of "Song of Myself," reiterates Whitman's conception and privileging of the body: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" [207].

Whitman body in its attempts to connect. He says, "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body" [Whitman: 211]. Whitman spreads his poetic body open by employing a narrator who experiences sexual erotic connections with other bodies, all of which is central to the poetic project of openness that aspires to reunite body and soul. These erotic moments are overt in the poem. For instance, he writes:

The beards of the young men glisten'd with wet, it ran from  
their long hair,  
 Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.  
 An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,  
 It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.  
 The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge  
 to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,  
 They do not think who they souse with spray [Whitman: 198].

The tender, eroticized lines portray the body and pleasure as raw, subtle, but accessible. A ubiquitous sense of touch exists in this section, visceral as it trembles along the body. Whitmanesque openness exists in the poem's formal body and in the bodies in its content. The language and image conjure up sensual intimacy as the "little streams pass'd all over their bodies," washing over the men before the moment of orgasm. Just as the form of the poem is expansive in its language a body in the poem spreads wide as though it is to receive another body through sex. The men "float on their backs," and the following lines suggest a climax as they drench each other and themselves with ejaculate. The open, erotic body is part of the poetic project: it comes from sexual pleasure and through sexual climax, bodies achieve spiritual ecstasy.

Along this trajectory of connection, erotic bodies emerge explicitly in climactic fashion in "I Sing the Body Electric." We see reciprocal fluid desires in lines such as, "The armies of those I love engirthing me, and I engirth them/ They will not let me off until I go with them, respond to them/ And charge them full with the charge of the soul" [Whitman: 250]. Here the speaker proposes how the body functions, and a *mélange* of body(ies) [erotic] and soul constitute Whitman's spiritual connectedness. He writes, "And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?/ And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" [Whitman: 250]. The use of the rhetorical question indicates ambiguity, but Whitman's reliance on the body suggests a necessary linkage between body and soul, a linkage that allows the poet to achieve his sexualized spirituality.

Moreover, this poem offers descriptions of the body in which Whitman is attentive to its functions and beauty. For example:

The expression of a well-made man appears not only in his  
 Face,  
 It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips  
 and wrists,  
 It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and  
 Knees, dress does not hide him [Whitman: 251].

Whether intellectually or androgynously erotic, the attention to the body in these lines point to fluid desire passing from the speaker into and out from

the text.<sup>9</sup> The speaker's attention to the twists and turns of the body reflects an investment in its shape, which implicitly inflects his desire. The speaker observes bodies, but also desires them and feels sensation from just witnessing their movement. Fluidity is further demonstrated and pushed when the speaker blends the erotic and the spiritual, asserting,

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,  
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,  
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh  
is enough,  
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so  
lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this  
then?  
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.  
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking  
on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that  
pleases the soul well [Whitman: 253].

The speaker's thoughts are fluid as he desires flesh that laughs and breathes. The erotic desires coalesce as the poet watches bodies, feels sensations and has a masturbatory fantasy about a sexual union among bodies as he "swim[s] in it as in a sea." Presumably, the "it" within this line refers to the bodily fluid (the delight) that the poet produces after experiencing arousal from either watching or remembering the company of these bodies and to "pass among them, or touch any one, or rest my arm for a moment." By the last line, the "looking, contact, and odor, please the soul," suggests that the poet forges connections to other bodies by masturbating and fantasizing about touching and smelling these bodies. The pleased soul indicates ecstasy achieved. This poem proclaims the body as beautiful, fluid, erotic, and connected with pleasing the soul, in a state of spiritual ecstasy.

Another example of a fluid erotic body exists in the third figure in the 29<sup>th</sup> Bather section of "Song of Myself." The woman wants to have sex with 28 undifferentiated men, which ultimately breaks erotic strictures because such an orgy transcends the objectives of procreative male-female sex. Since the speaker's desire is the same as hers, her desire serves as a screen for homoerotic pleasure; he fuses his body with hers when he remarks on the multiple desirous "unseen hand" which passes over the bodies of men, descending "trembling from their temples and ribs".<sup>10</sup> The hand may be his or hers or both, which is irrelevant considered within Whitman's notion of connectedness in the form of multiple bodies fused. The fluid desires in the 29<sup>th</sup> Bather section of "Song of Myself," parallel the fluid desires in "I Sing the Body Electric," in how the poet employs sex-seeking erotic bodies in a movement toward spiritual ecstasy.

The poet succeeds in accommodating an empty spirituality by using an erotic body to connect with another. He moves from being just a witness to

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<sup>9</sup> I say androgynous because Whitman accounts for the female form, too. He writes, "This is the female form,/A divine nimbus exhales it from head to foot,/It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,/I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it" Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*: 253.

<sup>10</sup> Pollak's focus in her discussion of adhesive love lies on the pronoun usage and how the "Her" in this section serves as a screen for homoerotic pleasure. Instead this essay accounts for the presence of multiple desires.

bodies (as we saw earlier in the "Song") to connecting in a spiritual state by exposing bodily connection and conjuring the presence of bodily fluids. The connection in this case came, literally, in the masturbation fantasy section of "I Sing the Body Electric," which signals, Whitman's progression toward a "moment of contact", as Aspiz asserts [Aspiz: 3].

Whitman's erotic body thus becomes spiritual body and along the trajectory of connection we see the changes and constant movement toward a multiplicity of sexual expression that encompasses this experience of spiritual ecstasy. Here Deleuze and Guattari's argument for productive desires is germane because Whitman's multiple bodies exploit the fluid desires. The multiplicity of fluid desire manifests out of a necessary connection between body and soul, the erotic body connecting allows the soul fulfillment, which involves a "blending of the sexual and the spiritual-beyond sex itself" [Aspiz: 3].<sup>11</sup> The state "beyond" is that fluid moment that allows the poet's project to reach an erotic apex in "Song of Myself" and "I Sing the Body Electric." The model of desire that Deleuze and Guattari offer assists us in conceptualizing these textual moments.

Whitman's ideas about connection shift in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." This poem offers the first signs of danger for the hope of spiritual ecstasy by suggesting the limits of the body erotic in the poetic project. Briefly, he offers himself to a "stranger," warning that he needs to be open, with this person "on a high hill," or "sailing sea," both images that conjure openness.<sup>12</sup> This openness that he generates materializes in the following lines, as he writes:

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,  
Where I may feel the throbs of your hear or rest upon  
your hip,  
Carry me with you go forth over land or sea;  
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,  
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried  
Eternally [Whitman: 271].

The poet achieves connection through a sexual union that leads to a spiritual ecstasy; he uses the erotic body to project an openness created by the use of "land" and "sea," which are both expansive images. In addition, the erotic body ascends into spiritual fulfillment, which is suggested by the short clause "carried eternally." However, this poem is replete with uncertainty about the ideas celebrated in the earlier poems. Previous poems straddle the line of erotic content and erotic form, but this poem places burden on erotic content with hesitant language that hints at the speaker's anxiety. For instance, he uses "if," "I may," and "you would," again pointing to the limits of the body. The poet realizes a limit or boundary and expresses in the dialogue. The receiver of this union, or "whoever you are

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<sup>11</sup> In Pollak's chapter, "Politics of Love," she discusses the complexity of Whitman's erotic body as it relates to spiritual connectedness. She writes, "Partly he believed the more ghostly spiritual body might realize itself in unknown future spheres. He was double, my soul and I, Whitman felt the familiar and unfamiliar and wanted them to accommodate each other". [Pollak: 85].

<sup>12</sup> Recall the recurrent use of the poet's ability to create "openness" in the form of sexual imagery. The openness is embedded in the images of wetness, the sea, and in orgasmic fantasizing.

holding me now in hand," must reciprocate this openness, whether by merely staying in the speaker's presence or engaging in contact.

### *A Transitional Disconnected Poet of War*

The sexual erotic body only lasts from 1855-1865 when the Civil War derails it, textually and literally. Whitman's writing reflects disconnection; the final stages of this trajectory are an experience of despair. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, the poet remains in transition from strongly physical bodies to strongly spiritual experiences [Killingsworth: 9].<sup>13</sup> The sexual "warrior within" dies and the poet born out of the horrors of the Civil War is a spiritual priest. As Killingsworth asserts, "The arrogant 1860 reference to "the Gods, my unknown lovers" became in 1867 "Gods, my lovers, faithful and true," reflecting a new religious awareness [Killingsworth: 14]. The poet engages this religious awareness in key sections of "Drum-Taps," and *Specimen Days*.

The poems of *Leaves of Grass* contain within them a trajectory of connection as Whitman attempts to fuse the body and soul in his experience of the world.<sup>14</sup> In the "Introduction," and parts of "Song of Myself," readers note the conception and intended function of the body for the poet. In "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now In Hand," a barrier emerges between the body and soul. Two poems in the "Drum-Taps" series expose conflict or shift that arises in the poetic project. Both poems engage wounded soldiers and men resulting from the Civil War. The poet struggles with the wounded because they are unable to reciprocate the openness he yearns for; the situation worsens as he views dismantled bodies, which are the ultimate dejection for the poet. The brief selection from *Specimen Days* illustrates the disconnected poet as his expansive eroticized experiences turns to methodical, empty records of the dead bodies.

We locate traces of this shift in "Vigil Strange I kept on the Field One Night." The poem begins with the soldier finding the fallen body; the two men exchange a gaze and fleeting touch. Initially we can dissect this poem solely on the word "strange," because while the soldiers experience a connection, one dies. Does he transcend death? The body of the fallen man changes in its function because it can no longer generate feeling or be a vehicle to open the soul, or connect with a body. The living soldier experiences a loose opening of the soul, noticing, "Not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I gazed" [Whitman: 438]. The silent lament speaks to a poetic sense of sympathy and love. Despite touch and "faithful love," the poet's love is not "enough." The love and attention to this fallen

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<sup>13</sup> Killingsworth argues that the poet's new role is one of a benevolent soulful poet, or a "vate," which is Latin for priest. Moreover, he argues the sexual poet of the body from 1855-1865, disappears and we see a shift to a poet of the soul in 1871 with religious poems like "Passage to India" [Killingsworth: 8].

<sup>14</sup> The experience of the world is in part a hope for a democratic community of love. In the scope of this paper, I have not addressed how his project connects to a democratic vision of love based on mostly homosocial bonding. It is part of my purpose to argue for a need of an erotic body to fuse with other bodies in order to reach spiritual ecstasy, which is all embedded in the democratic vision for America.



soldier fails to reach a sexualized spiritual state because the body is not responding, nor will it respond again, on earth. This body might respond beyond an earthly world, if only the speaker can transcend death to meet him again. The poet bears witness to deaths and the overall failure of an erotic body [through sex] in fulfilling a spiritual connection. This poem is particularly peculiar because it is ritualistic and the speaker is Christ-like in his care for his “son,” his “soldier.” These ritualistic acts stand in contrast to the sexualized spirituality in the aforementioned poems.

The grief that the soldier in “Vigil” experiences materializes in “The Wound-dresser.” Whitman introduces a flash back to his readers; an old man remembers these scenes and moments of silent death in which he attempts to heal, but not sexual energy. The catalogue of moments allows us to access the “hospital tent or roof’d hospital” in which he walks along “rows of cots” attending to each wounded body. The pithy images of “clotted rags and blood that are filled in a pail,” illustrate a more concrete barrier. There is no connection because the speaker did not participate in the war; his body is not subject to the same destruction. He says, “From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand/I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the/matter and blood” [Whitman: 444]. The body is literally breaking, which we see with references to amputation and blood; its surrender is dehumanizing for him. All he can do is attempt to “pacify them with a soothing hand,” but the fluency of the body and reciprocal desires are replaced with dislocation and obfuscation.

The poetry transforms into empty, meditative discourse because the fluency of the body is absent. This new emptiness is part of a religious awareness that the poet experiences as the War breaks down the body. For example, in “Capes Eternity and Trinity,” we see this awareness, this disconnected spirituality that the poet endures. He writes:

But the haughty, silent capes themselves; I doubt if any hills, or historic places of note, or anything of the kind elsewhere in the world, outvies these objects. They are very simple, they do not startle—at least they did not me—but they linger in one’s memory forever. They are placed near each other, side by side. Cape Eternity is bare. Trinity rock rises [Whitman: 906].<sup>15</sup>

The poetic meditation is different from the sexualized poetic body of earlier poems. The speaker is alone, embracing vast, “rugged and grim, yet indescribable beauty”.<sup>16</sup> This entry concludes with the testimony of a death of the soldier. He writes:

It is very still and warm, as the struggle goes on, and dwindles, a little more, and a little more—and then welcome oblivion, painlessness, death. A pause, a white bandage is bound under the jaw, the limpsy heads falls down, the arms are softly placed by the side, all composed, all still, and the broad white sheet is thrown over everything [Whitman: 762].

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<sup>15</sup> All passages drawn from 1892 edition of *Specimen Days*

<sup>16</sup> This writing entry precedes some of Whitman’s descriptions. He writes, “A lot of new wounded and sick are arriving. Yesterday the worst, many with bad and bloody wounds, long neglected. I thought I was cooler and more used to it [in 1863], but the sight of some cases brought tears into my eyes” [Whitman: 906].

Instead of erotic bodies exploiting sexual desires, the speaker observes the damaged body and grapples with its impending death. Not only has the poet's sexualized body drifted away, the poet is drifting, transitioning into a state of meditative disconnected spirituality as he simply records the death methodically in prose form.

For Whitman the words "Democracy" and "Union" are more than just abstract principles political discourse during the early years of the Republic. He saw these principles reified in bodies. His vision for America and an accessible identity centers on the poet's ability to sexually connect with bodies. Until the poet realizes the limits of the body, a fusion of bodies takes place and reaches a state of spiritual ecstasy. Some critics point to the discursive nature of reading Whitman's poems, but the beauty in the poetic project resists categorical ways of thinking about the human body, mind, and sexuality. We see an erotically charged body in "I Sing the Body Electric," and this poem offers the poet's reliance on an erotic body as a source of energy that at times fuses with the soul—to reach a holy state of ecstasy.<sup>17</sup> As we approach the "Drum Taps" poems, however, Whitman's effort falters because he is unable to connect physically, sexually, or share reciprocal emotions. Even as he approaches the war poems he gazes upon their pain in hopes of resurrecting them or at least voicing their grief. This essay considers a methodology for reading the body, erotic and spiritual, in Whitman's poetry. Along Whitman's journey, which becomes our journey as his chosen readers, we witness the psychological shift, a shift that results from his attempts to piece together a suffering America. Unfortunately, the poet's optimism faces challenge as the Civil War's spoils are replete in the continued institutionalization of slavery. Nonetheless we see an erotic warrior poet transform into a different type of writer in *Specimen Days*, a writer in crisis, with a complex spirituality.

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<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to explain the poet's stance in "I Sing the Body Electric" because the ecstasy is so intense that he fuses the body and soul. Recall he says, "What is the Body if not the Soul?"

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