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Antebellum Posthuman

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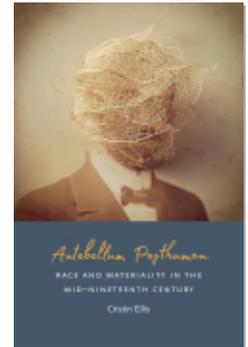
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Whitman's Cosmic Body: Bioelectricity and the Problem of Human Meaning

The preceding chapters have suggested the need to expand our familiar understanding of the debate over slavery and racial equality in the run up to the Civil War. Stepping back from the confrontation between racist science and antislavery liberalism, we can discern the emergence of a somewhat different disagreement. My readings of Douglass and Thoreau have thus aimed to show that the antebellum debate over racial equality was not solely a conflict between racist materialism and antislavery universalism, but it also involved a struggle within materialism itself over biologism's political entailments. If the political clout of racist science rested at least in part on the growing authority of biological conceptions of the human, Douglass's antislavery appeal to the autonomic instinct for self-preservation and Thoreau's antislavery faith in the morally progressive tendencies of speciological change both point out that biological conceptions of the human do not necessarily support proslavery or racist views. At the same time, as we have seen, their antislavery materialisms also create problems for longstanding humanistic assumptions about human autonomy and individual agency that were structurally central to the liberal mainstream of antebellum antislavery thought.

If nothing else, then, the preceding chapters have offered a lesson in the difficulty of mapping the antebellum moment according to our well-worn opposition between materialism-racism-slavery and idealism-liberalism-antislavery. Arguments that we have thought of as liberal (because antislavery), like Thoreau's and Douglass's, can turn out to be materialist in ways that complicate or even undermine the very possibility of liberalism. Inversely, arguments we have understood as materialist (because racist) can prove deeply invested in defending the premises of liberalism. After all, the animalized and hyper-embodied Black body of mid-nineteenth-century racist doctrine was designed to throw the inherent autonomy of the "fully" human (white, male) liberal subject into sharper relief. We have a working version of this thought in the now common observation that the primary function of Blackness in Western culture has been to consolidate and purify the concept of whiteness. In the context of racist science more specifically, embodying or racializing Blackness allowed for the comparative disembodiment of whiteness. When racial scientists cast the white race as the original and standard human form, or the most intellectually and morally advanced human form, they rendered the white body neutral or negligible to white humanity, thereby working to preserve the white subject's *bona fides* as a transcendently autonomous liberal subject.

As part of my effort to show that antebellum debates over slavery and racial difference thus became a front (indeed, arguably one of the most historically important fronts) in a broader and still ongoing cultural negotiation of the political entailments of materialism, I turn now to a set of questions that, at least at first, may seem far removed from these antebellum debates. This chapter explores Whitman's relation to two strains of antebellum embodied thought—one liberal and one more radically materialist—both of which were unstably conjoined within the American Spiritualist movement. Born in 1848, the Spiritualist movement rapidly gained popularity in the 1850s by propounding what it described as the first empirically grounded "religion of proof." Drawing upon research into the role of electricity in the body, Spiritualist doctrine held that the human soul is materially real—that it exists as a bioelectrical phenomenon—and that this material soul persists beyond the dissolution of the corporeal body, guaranteeing the immortality of the discrete, individual self. Thus though Spiritualism was not chiefly concerned with questions of racial difference, Spiritualist orthodoxy was like racist science in this limited sense: it, too, articulates a materialism that labors to preserve the integrity—that is, the boundedness and self-possession—of the liberal subject. As this chapter

will argue, however, the bioelectrical self that Spiritualism constructed was theoretically unstable. At odds with Spiritualist orthodoxy, Spiritualist practices of mediumship highlighted the bioelectrical self's physiological receptivity—its vulnerability to ambient material influences including communications from other material spirits. The porous communicativity of the bioelectrical self thus threatened to belie rather than to immortalize the boundedness of the Spiritualist subject. As I shall argue, this alternative, monistic, and open-ended bioelectrical self was an important inspiration for *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman's relation to Spiritualism allows us to track the ways that biologism circulated through the antebellum cultural imagination beyond discourses explicitly associated with racial science. Panning out from the immediate fray of the debate over slavery and equality, this chapter focuses on the difficulties that the antebellum embodied subject posed to the figure of the liberal subject more generally, and to the democratic politics that subject sustains. As we shall see, these difficulties were in some cases finessed or simply repressed whilst elsewhere they rise more immediately to the surface—perhaps nowhere more insistently, as I shall suggest, than in Whitman's groundbreaking antebellum poetry. The reading to follow begins by tracing Whitman's inheritance from Spiritualism's bioelectrical theology. I argue that the “body electric” that pulses at the center of his early poetry departs from Spiritualist orthodoxy, which distinguished the vulnerable earthly body from the indestructibly material soul, by instead conjuring a bioelectrical subject who is originally relational, granted identity not despite but because of the body's nervous entanglement with the world. Whereas Spiritualism promised to square the messy dependencies of human materiality with the transcendental integrity of the liberal individual, on my reading Whitman's poetry lays bare contradictions that are inherent to that project.

Indeed, I argue that Whitman's theory of nervous entanglement not only informs his poetic topoi but moreover structures his theory of poetic communication. That is, I propose that in addition to its thematic prominence in the early *Leaves*, the body electric furthermore provides the philosophical ground from which Whitman developed what I describe as the uniquely “embodied poetics” of his highly experimental first volumes. This novel poetics emphasizes the physiology of poetic communication over and against poetry's propositional content, challenging some of our most basic assumptions about what poems do and how they mean, as well as about the nature of the subjects between whom those poems and meanings pass.

As we shall see, Whitman's embodied poetics ultimately stress the constitutive indeterminacy of both the propositional poetic subject and the embodied human subject. Touting the body's entanglement in a procreant "reality . . . materialism first and last imbueing," Whitman attempts to engender a wholly new poetry adequate to a cosmos thus monistically and processually reimaged.¹

In our present critical moment, it is tempting to read Whitman's porous and processual self through the lens of posthumanist and specifically new materialist models of the human. Like Whitman's, these latter-day materialisms position the material body as a correction to the idealism of the liberal subject. But while this chapter will acknowledge intriguing parallels where they arise, I will ultimately suggest that Whitman's materialism remains something distinct. On my reading, Whitman's bioelectrical subject confronts us with the failure of attempts—both by antebellum era movements like Spiritualism and by posthumanist theory today—to reconcile the processual materialist body with a legibly liberal politics of democratic pluralism. For Whitman's bioelectrical self is finally so spectacularly indistinguishable from the cosmos that flows through his nervous body (plastically "quivering [him] to a new identity") that it is impossible to assign content—that is, anything like a stable meaning or essential identity—to this subject. To be sure, Whitman does not always acknowledge, let alone embrace, the effacement of identity that his poetry enacts. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate, the erosion of personal particularity in his work is inescapable, at once glaring and programmatic, arising at the level of both form and content in the early *Leaves*.

In its final movement, then, this chapter turns from the poetics of Whitmanian embodiment to consider the racial politics that this unidentifiable bioelectrical body encodes. Returning to the infamous slave auction scene in "I Sing the Body Electric," I show how Whitman's bioelectrical ontology gives rise to a highly idiosyncratic defense of racial equality that leaves the basic premises of liberal individuality and equality behind. If Whitman's materialism generates a powerful vision of racial unity here, its egalitarianism nonetheless bears little resemblance to the individualistic and pluralistic democratic politics that we conventionally attribute to his work—and that Whitman, himself, claimed to celebrate. As I argue, the tension between Whitman's processual bodies and the more conventionally liberal politics of mainstream antislavery discourse resurfaces in contemporary calls for a more radically pluralistic posthumanist democracy today, raising questions about the racial politics implicit in the posthumanist project. I will turn to

those questions, investigating the friction between posthumanism's fluid ontology and its recognizably liberal politics, in Chapter 4.

God Vibrations: The Bioelectrical Soul in Theory and Practice

In his 1860 review of *On the Origin of the Species*, Asa Gray confesses that the unraveling of liberal selfhood haunts midcentury science. Anticipating that many readers will find Darwin's theory objectionable because it conjoins human races and ultimately "makes the whole world kin," Gray points out that this unifying vision nonetheless harmonizes with the prevailing currents of modern scientific thought. After all, he observes, the "principle triumphs" of modern science "have consisted in tracing connections where none were known before, in reducing heterogeneous phenomena to a common cause or origin, in a manner quite analogous to that of the reduction of supposed independently originated species to a common ultimate origin." Indeed, Gray continues, the "scientific mind" now "contemplates the solar system as evolved from a common, revolving fluid mass . . . has come to regard light, heat, electricity, magnetism, chemical affinity, and mechanical power as varieties or derivative and convertible forms of one force . . . and . . . speculates steadily in the direction of the ultimate unity of matter."² However much Darwin's vision of speculative unity "discomposes us," then, Gray warns that our preference for separateness, difference, and hierarchy voices a doomed resistance to the model of physical reality that nineteenth-century science was progressively unveiling: that of a monistic cosmos unified by a fretwork of past and ongoing material interrelations that belie categorical distinctions between races, species, and ultimately even between physical bodies.

If it was obvious to Gray that modern scientific materialism was poised to engulf white racial—and ultimately human—exceptionalism in one vast, monistic soup, not all antebellum materialists concurred with this projection. Darwin's polygenist and monogenist detractors obviously understood themselves to be giving an empirical account of reality and so, too, did antebellum Spiritualism, the movement to which I turn in this chapter. As I shall argue, Spiritualism's distinctive brand of materialism forms an important cultural context for *Leaves of Grass*: in addition to popularizing the divinized "body electric" that would prove so powerfully inspiring to Whitman, Spiritualist discourse housed two contradictory views of materialism whose tensions help to illuminate the complex role of embodiment in Whitman's work.

Officially, Spiritualist doctrine espoused a kind of onto-theology that held that spirits are empirically real (comprised of bioelectricity) and that promised that we persist as materially embodied and autonomously individual spirits beyond the grave. In practice, as we shall see, the communicative performances associated with Spiritualism—in which mediums claimed to channel spirits and speak in the voices of the dead—point to a very different conception of the bioelectrical self, flaunting its susceptibility to external forces and the porosity of the border between one self and another. The vulnerability and fungibility of the bioelectrical self in Spiritualist mediumship was thus at odds with the discretely bounded individualism of the bioelectrical soul espoused in Spiritualist doctrine. In this opposition, Spiritualist doctrine bears a structural resemblance to antebellum racist science's resistance to Darwinian monogenism in that it, too, framed a materialist account of the human that worked to defend the figure of the liberal subject against encroachment from more radically conjunctive materialisms. Ultimately, Spiritualism's internal contradictions make it a particularly vivid example of just how uncertain materialism's relation to liberal individualism was in this moment.

Unfolding in proximate relation to “professional” science (the prior chapter should give some indication of how tenuous such borders were in this era), the American Spiritualist movement rose to popularity in the 1850s promulgating what it described as a rigorously scientific “religion of proof.” Its ostensibly empirical theology centered on the uniquely ambivalent substance of electricity, that invisible yet material stuff that “sparks” the body into life. Indeed, despite decades of empirical investigation, electricity remained at midcentury a phenomenon stubbornly resistant to scientific disenchantment.³ Stymied by its oscillation between object and event, materiality and impalpability, chemists dubbed it an “imponderable fluid,” and since the late eighteenth century, when its role in galvanizing the nervous system was first experimentally established, bioelectricity had inspired a series of popular therapeutic movements, including mesmerism and phrenology. When it first arose in 1848, then, Spiritualism was the latest face of what was already a vibrant constellation of bohemian bioelectrical movements.⁴ Drawing upon both scientific and peri-scientific discourses, Spiritualism proclaimed electricity the missing link between the ineffable human spirit and its effable body. As one phrenologist put it, bioelectricity revealed the “godlike department of our nature reduced to DEMONSTRABLE CERTAINTY”: it furnished, in short, the perceptible matter of the soul.⁵

Spiritualists stressed the scientism of their faith, confident that the measurable materiality of bioelectricity would soon lead scientists to verify the empirical reality of the spiritual world. Arguing that mind “is a substance—an element—as really so as air or water,” they insisted that the body’s electrical mechanisms furnish “sensuous evidence” of the soul.⁶ Indeed, the soul was so utterly substantial in Spiritualist discourse that questions like “how much does a soul weigh?” were seriously entertained while traditional theological teachings about the “*immateriality* of the spirit” were roundly dismissed as “the most consummate nonsense.”⁷ Spiritualists thus took pains to distinguish their own rationalist theology from what they saw as the baseless mysticism of other religions. As the movement’s first major codifier, Andrew Jackson Davis, protested, “If men do not consult Nature and Reason, and ‘try the spirits’ by the rigid righteousness of those immutable principles . . . there can not be any limits set to the wild fanaticism and superstitious absurdities into which the honest seekers after truth and spirituality will not assuredly plunge themselves.”⁸ Whatever else Spiritualism may have been—a theatrical entertainment, profitable quackery, a program for consoling the bereaved—it was also a site of metaphysical speculation, propounding the materiality of the spirit and, conversely, the intrinsic spirituality of matter.

One of the specific attractions of Spiritualism’s fusion of science and religion was its claim to have reconciled the dispiriting facts of human materiality with continued faith in the individual’s transcendent autonomy. Whereas other biologisms seemed to sentence the self to contingency by suggesting that our minds and moral characters are merely by-products of the bodies we are born with, the bioelectrical soul allowed Spiritualism to conceive of identity as the expression of a spirit that is independent of the corporeal body (just like the classically Christian soul) and yet demonstrably material nonetheless. This compromise funded Spiritualism’s chief consolatory promise: that heaven and the afterlife are just as real and materially substantial as our spirits. Thus Andrew Jackson Davis taught that death does not spell the end of the body nor of individual subjectivity but rather works as a kind of “cleansing process” that purifies our earthly bodies of “their transient imperfections.” On this embodied account, death looks less like a miraculous translation from one ontological state (flesh) into one wholly other (spirit) and more like an accelerated form of evolution that instantaneously perfects each individual body according to what Jackson characterized as a “beautiful . . . law of progress.”⁹

In her best-selling Spiritualist novel, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps paints a vivid picture of this embodied heaven populated by

immortal yet fully material individuals. Bereaved by the death of her brother, the novel's heroine, Mary Cabot, finds no solace in her minister's account of the afterlife as a state in which all individuality melts away, bearing off with it all "selfish affections" such as love for one's family to leave only a bliss that "glow[s] with holy love alike to all other holy hearts."¹⁰ Mary's Spiritualist preceptor, Aunt Winifred Forceythe, shudders at this vision of spiritual communion, objecting that it "would destroy individuality at one fell swoop. We should be like a man walking down a room lined with mirrors, who sees himself reflected in all sizes, colors, shades, at all angles and in all proportions . . . til he seems no longer to belong to himself."¹¹ "The truth is," she concludes, "the ordinary idea [of heaven], if sifted accurately, reduces our eternal personality to—*gas*."¹² What Phelps's characters find unacceptable in orthodox Christian doctrine, then, is the prospect of a spiritual existence that annihilates the liberal self, dissolving her into a "great blank ocean" of celestial community "which shall swallow up, in a pitiless, glorified way, all the little brooks of our delight."¹³ By contrast, the great appeal of Spiritualist theology for these characters is its promise that, since "the spiritual body is real, is tangible, is visible, is human," we shall therefore still very much "be *ourselves* in heaven," retaining all of our personal affections (those "little brooks of our delight") and our private possessions—including, most importantly, the particular and particularizing bodily "sizes, colors, shades" that encode our (gendered and racial) identities and that allow us, Aunt Forceythe suggests, to belong to ourselves.¹⁴ Indeed, Aunt Winifred triumphantly insists that we shall even continue to live in private houses with our nuclear families—both of which, she confesses, will undergo "many differences and great ones" in the process of purification, yet ultimately will remain recognizably "*mine* just the same."¹⁵ In place of a gaseous oneness with God, Aunt Forceythe's Spiritualist afterlife looks more like the idealized brochure for a new suburban community, promising everything the liberal individual's possessive heart had ever desired in life.¹⁶

Spiritualism's materialist reconceptualization of the soul thus allowed it to guarantee the integrity of liberal personhood even after the decomposition of the mortal body. In this specific sense, Spiritualist materialism echoes racist science in that both offer their adherents an embodied account of the human that simultaneously works to preserve the singularity and autonomy of the liberal subject. For the many Spiritualists who also identified as abolitionists, as well as for Spiritualist practitioners of color, the similarity likely stopped there: unlike racist materialism, Spiritualist materialism did not propose that only some (white, male) persons qualify as truly ensouled or autonomous.

But if it was not systematically racist, neither was Spiritualism programmatically antiracist. Indeed, despite deep cultural connections to the abolitionist and feminist movements, many prominent Spiritualists did suggest that the bioelectrical soul was most fully developed in the white race. Thus, for instance, Andrew Jackson Davis asserted that the phenomenon of Spiritual communication (the practice in which a Spiritualist medium, endowed with exceptionally refined powers of nervous “receptivity,” channels electromagnetic transmissions from the spirit realm, speaking for the dead) first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century because it was only just then enabled by the evolutionary advancement of the white race. As Davis argued, the “miracles and spiritual disclosures of this era flow *naturally* and *consequently* from the state of mental and moral development to which the Anglo-Saxon portion of the human race has generally attained.”¹⁷ In light of a statement like this, Spiritualism’s individualistic afterlife (complete with gendered and raced bodies, domestic spaces, and nuclear family units), stands out more clearly as a markedly conservative vision—a rejection of the undifferentiated communalism of the “gaseous” afterlife Phelps’s characters deplore. Indeed, Davis proclaimed that heaven is in fact partitioned into six hierarchical societies, “each being characterized by a different race of spirits . . . in different stages of moral culture,” and by the late 1860s Spiritualist cartographies uniformly mapped heaven as a racially partitioned space in which “every race and nation . . . enjoyed its own unique heaven peculiarly suited to its individual needs and desires.”¹⁸ If Phelps’s heaven seems like a suburban paradise, Davis’s shared the dream of segregation that would fund the suburbanization of America a century later.

As individualistic as this doctrine seems, however, Spiritualism’s bioelectrical self was also a philosophically unstable entity. Much like the paradoxically insubstantial electrical substance that inspires it, the Spiritualist subject oscillates between singularity and diffusion thanks to the inherently communicative function of bioelectricity. This instability was spectacularly on display in the practice of Spiritualist mediumship, which was the movement’s main means of demonstrating its bioelectrical faith and recruiting converts from audiences who arrived by turns skeptical and curious. As Davis explains, spirit communications are made possible by the fact that we exude a “general electric atmosphere,” breathing our spiritual electricity into the space around us like a cloud of perfume. When the mind is properly relaxed, “these electrical elements flow down from the brain into the nerves, and into all the infinite ramifications of the nerves, and

thence into the atmosphere which we breathe,” generating a uniquely refined electrical field “through which communications [between souls] can be made.”¹⁹ In the event of communication, the medium conducts the electrical emanations of another soul into his or her own body, allowing that soul to speak and even act through the medium’s nervous circuits.

The Spiritualist medium, then, conjures a very different view of the bioelectrical self. Unlike the corporeally defined and possessive Spiritualist subject whom Davis and Phelps project into heaven, the Spiritualist medium is chiefly distinguished by her capacity for nervous receptivity and sympathetic affinity: porous and possessed, she is a conduit of sympathetic connection with souls not her own. The fluidity of identity modeled by Spiritualist mediums injected the movement with radical tendencies not legible within its conservative account of a bounded and individualistic afterlife. Thus, for instance, in what Molly McGarry describes as the “amorphous sexual matrix” opened up by the practice of mediumship, Spiritualist men and women were free to perform other genders in ways corrosive to the strictures of mid-century gender ideology. Spiritualist séances and demonstrations provided a sanctioned space in which Spiritualist practitioners could “reimagine their gender through practices ranging from cross-dressing to defying the vocal ranges equated with sexual difference.”²⁰ For female mediums in particular—often young and poor—this license to command an audience and speak in the tongue and tones of dead presidents afforded unprecedented access to a public authority otherwise forbidden to them in both church and state. Indeed, Spiritualism was closely associated with the feminist movement: as Anne Braude notes, “While not all feminists were Spiritualists, all Spiritualists advocated women’s rights.”²¹

But if mediumship allowed women to performatively lay claim to the “masculine” virtues of liberal agency and autonomy, the important point here is that it did so by spotlighting the fictionality of that liberal self. In this sense, Spiritualist feminism is a curiously double-edged sword, insofar as mediumship enabled female practitioners to assert a liberal autonomy via a practice that tacitly gainsaid it. Beyond sanctioning trans-gender and cross-class performances, then, the larger unorthodoxy of Spiritualist mediumship inheres in its public demonstration of a bioelectrical self whose borders are permeable and whose subjectivity is curiously multiple—sympathetic, affiliative, and uncannily networked with other minds. Instead of conferring individual identity (as Phelps imagines that our distinctive bodily “sizes, colors, shades . . . and proportions” do), the medium’s

nerve-riddled body is the site of bioelectrical exchanges that attenuate individual identity, capitulate autonomy, and blur the boundary between subjects. Along these lines, John Lardas Modern describes the Spiritualist subject as someone who is alternately “in control yet susceptible to human influences, both past and present,” and in this way uncertainly poised between contingency and autonomy, “docility and freedom.”²² Similarly, Stephanie LeMenager has shown how the bioelectrical body’s susceptibility was also understood to extend to climatic influences, which Spiritualists believed could variously enhance or hinder conductivity between spirits, vitalizing or vitiating the bioelectrical self. As LeMenager notes, this climactically tuned Spiritualist subject seems perpetually at risk of dissolving “within a network of energetic actors” in the “atmospheric soup” of the environment.²³

Thus, while Spiritualism’s main selling point was its claim to have successfully fused corporeal materiality, liberal individuality, and Christian immortality, the bioelectrical subject who effected this grand *détente* simultaneously seemed to belie the model of selfhood it stood for. As the critics above suggest, the sympathetic susceptibility and communicativeness that characterize the bioelectrical self light up an invisible dimension of embodied being, extending selfhood beyond the border of our electrically conductive skin. In this way, Spiritualist discourse generated two contradictory visions of self and world: a recognizably liberal-individualist one, in which the bioelectrical soul guarantees the persistence of individual identity after death and heaven is a segregated space; and a monistic one, in which the bioelectrical soul blurs the bounds of identity and the universe is materially interconnected.

That this internal contradiction does not seem to have troubled Spiritualist discourse may be attributable to the fact that both versions of the bioelectrical self seem to agree upon its central revelation of humanity’s empirically supernatural nature. And yet the logics of transcendence underpinning these two visions are philosophically quite distinct. For Spiritualist expositors like Davis and Phelps, the supernaturalism of bioelectricity derives from the occult nature of electricity itself, poised as it was between thingy materiality and celestial imponderability. Thus, glossing Saint Paul’s assertion that “There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body,” Davis explains that, indeed, “the spiritual body is a substance” that is moved by “a fine force” or spirit that “flows through [the] nerve-sensations.” In short, for Davis, the ethereality of bioelectricity (the rarified fineness of its “force”) allows it to occupy two ontological statuses (material and spiritual) at once, thereby manifesting the human body’s inherently other-

worldly endowment: “the invisible presence of the Divine in the visible human.”²⁴

By contrast, as I have suggested, the practice of spiritual mediumship foregrounds a rather different conception of bioelectricity’s transcendentalism. (Ostensibly) demonstrating the bioelectrical subject’s susceptibility to external forces—to “human influences, both past and present” as well as to atmospheric influences in the nonhuman environment—the spectacle of spiritual communication highlights both the nervous self’s permeability and its extension beyond the bounds of its skin. But though the latter version of bioelectrical transcendentalism therefore contends that our beings are not wholly contained in our bodies, it does not explicitly insist upon being’s supernaturalism. Charles Taylor’s distinction between “enchanted” (ensouled) and “buffered” (secular) selves is helpful for drawing out this discrepancy. On Taylor’s description, the peculiar quality of “enchantment” that the concept of the soul has traditionally named refers to the idea that there is some aspect of human being that transcends the body and renders it susceptible to supernatural forces beyond human ken or command.²⁵ Clearly, the Spiritualist medium’s bioelectrical porosity bears a structural resemblance to Taylor’s enchanted self. This similarity, however, depends upon a conceptual sleight of hand, for the medium is susceptible to forces that are represented as material rather than supernatural—he is affected by electrical emanations and climactic influences, manifesting the body’s porosity to a physical world that impinges on his senses at every instant. Although these material forces may be so various and complex as to be practically incalculable, they are not, like supernatural forces, *essentially* incalculable. This is, in other words, a transcendentalism that does not leave the realm of the natural world—bringing it closer to Asa Gray’s empirical vision of “the ultimate unity of matter” than to Phelps’s and Davis’s Spiritualist accounts of an individualistic afterlife. Indeed, in stark contrast to Phelps’s disdain for “gaseous” communion, this monistic tendency within Spiritualist practice ultimately envisions us as part of a vast embodied commons, or what Robert Cox calls a “social physiology,” in which all bodies are woven “into the fiber of a sympathetically united nation in precisely the same way that the nerves, organs, and tissues were integrated within the organic body.”²⁶ At odds with Spiritualism’s doctrinal commitments to the possessive and autonomous liberal self, then, the bioelectrical physics of mediumship threatened to explode this integral subject by rendering it finally indistinguishable from a larger and fluidly networked material world.

The Poet as Nervous Medium

Spiritualism's transcendental materialism and adhesive individualism were attractive to Whitman and are important contexts for his thinking about embodiment and sexuality.²⁷ The movement's influence on the early *Leaves of Grass* is particularly unmistakable in Whitman's unorthodox assertions of the body's divinity. "If the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" he demands. Although he treats this as a rhetorical question, the burden of explanation is obviously Whitman's. In prefatory notes for the first edition of *Leaves*, he offers an initial defense of this statement, writing:

We hear of miracles, but . . . tell me then, if you can, what is there in the immortality of the soul more than this spiritual and beautiful miracle of sight? . . . I open two pairs of lids, only as big as peach pits, when lo! the unnamable variety and whelming splendor of the world come to me . . . though rocks are dense and hills are ponderous, and the stars are away off sextillions of miles.²⁸

This note can read as a familiar enough defense of the wonders of the human body: sight instantaneously ferries "ponderous" objects across even cosmic distances in order to reveal mountains and starlight to us. In his 1802 *Natural Theology* (required reading when Thoreau was at Harvard), William Paley famously points to the intricacy of the eye as evidence that it, along with the rest of nature, must have been purposively designed, thus proving the existence of God. (Indeed, the intuitive force of Paley's argument was such that in, 1860, after publishing the treatise that would ring natural theology's death knell, Darwin confessed to Asa Gray, "The eye to this day gives me a cold shudder.")²⁹ In drawing our attention to the marvel of eyesight, then, Whitman might be making a Paleyan claim, pointing to the phenomenon of sight as empirical proof of the body's divine origin.

By the time this note made its way into the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), however, Whitman had refined his characterization of sight's miraculous nature. In the preface, he observes,

What is marvelous? what is unlikely? what is impossible or baseless or vague? after you have once just opened the space of a peachpit . . . and had all things enter with electric swiftness softly and duly and without confusion or jostling or jam.³⁰

Whitman's restatement clarifies that it is not the *fact* of sight that impresses him (isn't it amazing that we can see?) but more specifically sight's bioelec-

trical physiology that he finds so improbable: in the moment of perception, “things enter” the eye “with electric swiftness,” inscribing impressions on the nervously receptive body. For Whitman, then, there is something distinctly miraculous—“marvelous,” “unlikely,” “baseless or vague”—about the way the body’s bioelectrical mechanisms render us permeable, revealing our physiological porosity to “all things.”

As we have seen, Whitman was hardly alone at midcentury in discerning something tantalizingly like “the immortality of the soul” vouchsafed by nervous electricity. More specifically, we are now in a position to note how Whitman’s account of the bioelectrical soul echoes the earth-bound transcendentalism implicit in the Spiritualist practice of mediumship, and at odds with Spiritualist orthodoxy. It is, after all, not the inherent divinity of electricity but the bioelectrical body’s permeability—its ability to reach beyond itself and to be, in turn, suffused by things not itself—that elicits Whitman’s wonder and prompts his conclusion that the body is enchanted, itself a soul. Again, as I have argued, this gloss of transcendentalism involves an elision or misdirection insofar as it asks us to substitute the body’s nervous porosity to *material* forces for the susceptibility to supernatural forces that has historically distinguished the enchanted self. Insofar as the former state can be called transcendental, the susceptibility it names delivers us not into an electro-spiritual afterlife but rather into a physiologically conjoined cosmos, disclosing a self suffused not by the immanent presence of the divine so much as by the immanent presence of the world—a vast yet mundane communion.

To be sure, Whitman will also inherit Spiritualism’s contradictions, most spectacularly displayed in the way his speaking persona veers between egotistical particularity and impersonal collectivity—occasionally in the same breath (“Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos”). The reading I will be offering here, however, proposes that *Leaves of Grass* programmatically foregrounds the latter. That is, despite Whitman’s claim to have been “the poet of the self,” I submit that his poetry consistently foregrounds the self’s dispossession and identity’s constant dissolution, celebrating the ways in which the nervous system’s sensuous receptivity interpellates us within a vast network of earthly communication and embodied sociality. In this section I will examine key moments in which the early *Leaves* thematizes bodily porosity and the dissolution of individual identity, and I will suggest how reading these moments in light of midcentury bioelectrical discourse can usefully expand and reinfect our discussions of sexuality in Whitman’s work. In the following section, I explore how Whitman’s interest in bioelectricity shows up not only at the

Without detracting from this account of Whitman's "audacious molding" of hygienic theory into queer desire, we might nonetheless consider what happens to this passage when we take its accusation against "villain touch" more literally. That is, if we read this passage as a complaint not against sexual desire specifically so much as against the fact of sensuousness more generally, its narrative of incursion and ravishment begins to read differently. Spotlighting how our nervous physiology renders all sensation a form of penetration—as nerves "seize every object" they encounter, shepherding them into our bodies via storms of bioelectrical "lighting"—the passage draws our attention to the impossibility of self-sovereignty in light of the manifest un-callousness of our shells. The speaker's panic in the face of this incursion is that of a liberal subject who has presumed the integrity of his physiological borders and his absolute possession of the body they delimit. Hence he experiences the mundane physiology of touch as a radical betrayal—not only is he susceptible to this "red marauder" of sensation but worse, it is aided and abetted by the "treacherous tip" of his own sensuously receptive skin—which he now finds does not act as a border or islanding "headland" at all, but rather as an eager network of "instant conductors."

On this reading, onanism would be exactly the wrong way to think of this scene, since its larger point is that self-stimulation is structurally unavoidable given our nervous architecture: in every waking moment, our senses are working to arouse and provoke us. Indeed, more broadly, I worry that to gloss the invading force here as specifically *sexual*, as distinct from sensual, in nature risks minimizing or missing entirely the polemic against the liberal self this passage otherwise encodes. For whereas the discourse on sexuality stresses object choice and is directed toward typological identification, sensuality is indiscriminate and (as this passage luridly illustrates) belies our individuation. Thus though we might be tempted (as the speaker initially was) to view this scene of overmastery as a threat to be resisted, the passage ultimately instructs us to accept that dispossession is a feature inherent to bioelectrical subjectivity because the body is a sensitive medium of communication and change. "I and nobody else am the greatest traitor": for Whitman, to be a nervously embodied self is to testify, involuntarily (of course) and at all times, against the doctrine of individual autonomy and identity.

But while this passage exposes the fiction of autonomy, unlike more recent denunciations of the liberal subject (such as those coming out of deconstruction, posthumanism, and affect theory), its mood is not strictly celebratory. Instead, the violence of Whitman's imagery and anxiety of his

speaker task us to acknowledge the sacrifice this shift in outlook entails. To be sure, as we have also seen with Spiritualist mediumship, the porosity of bioelectrical embodiment works to reunite self and world in a single system of continuous mutual exchange (hence our speaker here finds that his senses “strike what is hardly different from myself”). But if the bioelectrical body therefore stands to release us from the burden of singularity, relieving our sense of alienation from the world, by the same token it also threatens to do away with our sense of being anyone in particular at all. For although Whitman admires that sensations move through us “harmlessly,” he also makes clear that they are not without consequence. To the contrary, sensuous perception materially alters this speaker, “quivering [him] to a new identity.” Indeed, since there is no disembodied soul to serve as a separate locus of identity in the version of bioelectrical embodiment Whitman invokes, all material alterations to the body therefore constitute changes at the level of being.³² More pointedly, then, if every sensuous perception is a touch, and every touch quivers us to a new identity, then in what sense can we—incribed and revised by each passing experience—still lay claim to something like an identity at all? If this scene feels like a rape, it is because of its attention to the violence its monistic ontology does to the speaker’s sense of selfhood. Brought face to face with his susceptibility to the world and the continuous existential renovation embodied experience wreaks, this speaker becomes, like his identity, incoherent: “I talk wildly . . . I have lost my wits . . .” Indeed it would seem that talking wildly is inevitable now since the no longer tenable fiction of a self-representing “I” has been displaced by a babbling bioelectrical “we”—I, my hands, their nerves, villain touch, and the “red marauder” of sensation that tethers me to other bodies “hardly different from myself.” If the porosity of embodiment gains us the world, this passage observes that it also costs us that thing we have heretofore known as the self.

Indeed, across the pages of *Leaves*, embodied selves and other objects freely dissolve and coalesce again in Whitman’s intermittently liquefying gaze, enumerated in one moment and in the next proving composite or dispersed beyond recognition. Individual bodies are ramified by all that exists around them: you are “your person and every particle that relates to your person.”³³ And these horizontal relations of association and interaction also extend longitudinally across time, as Whitman indicates when he describes himself as an index of the earth’s entire history: “Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me, / My embryo has never been torpid. . . For it the nebula cohered to an orb. . . Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care.”³⁴ Moreover, he

also understands each thing to be an index of everything that will unfold from its body after its death: "I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags/I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles."³⁵ Despite the presence of nouns and proper names, then, Whitman's bodies are perpetually in transit—processual, ongoing—and thus belie any name we would give them. In Michael Warner's acutely succinct words, Whitman "makes the phenomenology of selfing a mess."³⁶

Despite the continuous transformations implicit in its processual ontology, however, *Leaves* will not sustain the elegiac awareness of self-loss it registers in the violence of the foregoing long passage. More commonly Whitman is, like his posthumanist counterparts, optimistic that the body's integration with the world does not entail the dispossession of the self so much as its heroic dilation. Perhaps Whitman's most ecstatic articulation of this thought comes at the very outset of *Leaves*, in the poetics he lays out in the 1855 preface. Here Whitman defines the poet as a particularly talented medium, someone who can make himself a channel of the whole nation, conducting the panoply of its influences into his receptive and plastic body:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. . . . he gives them reception . . . he incarnates [his nation's] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and St. Lawrence with the falls and the beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him. . . . When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. . . . On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak and locust and chestnut . . . with flights and songs and screams that answer those of the wildpigeon and highhold and orchard oriole and coot and surf-duck. . . . To him the hereditary countenance descends both mother's and father's. To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines . . . the first settlements north or south—the rapid stature and muscle—the haughty defiance of '76 . . . the wharf hem'd cities and superior marine . . . the free commerce—the fisheries and whaling and gold-digging—the endless gestation of new states. . . . For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. . . .

[He] sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms.³⁷

No ordinary panorama, this catalog collects sights that ostensibly enter the poet's body and transform him, so that it is the poet, not his poem, that ultimately "incarnates" this landscape.³⁸ Whitman's preface thus breaks with the oracular tradition of Romantic poetics that preceded him, and that cast the poet as a visionary who prophetically sees through the material world to lay bare "the soul of the thing" (Emerson), unveiling the "spirit of its form" (Shelley).³⁹ Leaning on the bioelectrical body, Whitman reimagines poetic perception as an event in which the poet does not see penetratively through objects but is himself penetrated and inscribed by them. He does not write a great poem; he *is* one.

And thus in the climax to his discourse on "the curious mystery of the eyesight" in the 1855 preface, Whitman promises that by reading his poetry we, too, can become embodied poems. "Read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life," he instructs, "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 the very movement and joint of your body."⁴⁰ The fungibility of bodies and poems in Whitman's thinking points to a broader translation between the poetics of embodiment I have been examining here and what I will call, in the next section, his embodied poetics. Although his suggestions that poetry impinges on a reader's body directly have alternately been denounced and embraced as pure "mysticism," in the next section I will explain why Whitman's embodied poetics—with its persistent conflation of bodies and poems, and perversely counterfactual claims to be able to touch the bodies of its readers—must be understood in relation to the historically specific form of materialism propagated by midcentury bioelectrical discourse.⁴¹ Via the nervous impressionability of the bioelectrical body, Whitman came to rethink poetry as a site, first and foremost, of haptic communication—a means of transferring not meanings but transformative physical effects via an intimate sensuous encounter called reading.

Causal Encounters: The Meaningless Intimacies of Embodied Poetics

Inspired by bioelectrical physiology, in the 1855 *Leaves* Whitman constructs a novel poetics—a new semiotic theory about what poetry is, how it communicates, and by extension, what kinds of things *subjects* (as in per-

sons and as in poetic propositions) are. As I shall argue, this new poetics abjures poetry's propositional subject in order to foreground its materiality as a medium of communication, and this inversion generates many of the idiosyncrasies typical of Whitman's early style, including his penchant for deictics and second-person address, his strangely diffuse yet resolutely embodied persona, and his signature early form, the catalog. But more disconcertingly, I suggest, Whitman's bioelectrical media theory also engenders the eccentricity of his overt disdain for hermeneutics ("these leaves conning you con at peril") and his audacious renunciations of authorial intent ("you will hardly know who I am or what I mean"). Put simply then, I will be tracing here how the dissolution of the liberal subject we have just observed also entails, on Whitman's bioelectrical theory, the dissolution of the subject—the meaning—of poetry.

To understand how bioelectrical discourse might have influenced Whitman's sense of what poetry is and does, it will first help to understand how Spiritualism's onto-theology also functioned as a media theory. Through their popular (if perhaps spurious) demonstrations of bioelectrical communication (sometimes described as "spiritual telegraphy"), Spiritualist mediums drew attention to the material mechanisms by which thought is transmitted from one mind or soul to another. This aspect of Spiritualist theory is spelled out for us in the following excerpt from an editorial published in *Harper's* in April 1852, which, if skeptical about Spiritualism's claim to communicate with the dead, is nonetheless persuaded by its bioelectrical account of communication. As this editor explains,

Is not the communication from soul to soul literally, as well as figuratively, *tele-graphic*, that is, *far-writing*, or *writing from afar*? An identity might, perhaps, be shown in the very medium of communication, so far as the process has a material medium. There is no difficulty, and no danger, in admitting that the electric fluid may be the agent in the cerebral and organic transmission, as well as in the galvanic battery. . . . The soul, by its own spiritual energy, first turns the emotion or feeling into a thought. It translates the thought from the abstract to the concrete, from the intuitional to the conceptive. It brings it down into the soul's chamber of imagery, and imprints it on the brain. In other words, the message is reduced to writing and given to the clerk at the station-house, who translates it into telegraphic signals. The more immediate transmitting power is now set in operation. An influence is imparted from the brain to the nerves (or wires) of the vocal organs. It is continued to the lungs, and sets in motion a current of air. This impinges on the outward atmosphere,

and is carried on through successive undulations until it reaches the other station for which it was designed. It enters the office-chamber of the ear, communicates with the other cerebral battery, and then writes off from the auditory nerve or wire, the signals which, by the other logical and linguistic faculty, or the clerk at the second station, are translated into the pictorial symbols understood by all, and thus written on the second brain.⁴²

According to this bioelectrical model of communication, thought is always materially instantiated. Originating when the “spiritual energy” of the soul converts a “feeling” or “intuition” impulse (what we might now term an affect) into a “conceptive” piece of mental “imagery,” thought is serially transposed: first it is “reduced to writing;” then it is “translate[d] into telegraphic signals” that shoot through the nerves; next it is translated by the vocal chords into “a current of air” (or, spoken language) and ferried through “the outward atmosphere,” at which point it begins the process of reverse-translation into nervous “signals” and thence into “pictorial symbols” in the listener’s brain.

Two things are particularly worth noting about the account of communication this editorial describes. The first is how its focus on the physiology of transmission shifts our attention from hermeneutics to the haptics of language. There is little interest in anything like meaning, representation, or interpretation here, and the serial translations this model entails (from “emotion” into “thought;” brain “imagery” into nervous “writing;” and from these “telegraphic signals” into spoken “currents of air;” etc.) occasion no concern about the distortion or loss of an original message. What counts as “understanding” or the achievement of “meaning” here therefore shows up not as the product of an act of interpretation, but instead simply coincides with the closing of the communicative circuit: the message is successfully received when this series of energetic transfers arrests in the brain or soul of the listener.

The second thing to notice about this account is how its bioelectrical model of communication effaces the difference between bodies and texts. According to its physics of information, thought is always materially instantiated—as “pictorial symbols” in the brain, electrical “signals” in the nerves, “a current of air” on the lips, and rippling “undulations” in the atmosphere. And yet, as we have just seen, despite its emphasis on thought’s material embodiment, at no point does this account worry that information is being lost, added, or simply reshaped by its translation from one medium to another. In her landmark study of informatics, N. Katherine

Hayles describes this indifference to medium specificity as the symptom of an outlook in which information has “lost its body.”⁴³ But a more Whitmanian way to put this might be to say that, on this account, bodies have become information: manifesting electrical “writing” in the states of its brain and nerves, this bioelectrical body is *readable*: a fleshy text.⁴⁴

In this regard, the bioelectrical account of communication opens up fresh perspectives on Whitman’s habitual conflation of poems and persons, and on the distinctive (sometimes even aggressively presumptuous) erotics this conflation lends to his theory of poetry. “Come closer to me. . . . I pass so poorly with paper and types I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.”⁴⁵ Through deftly misdirectional deictics and the unearned familiarity of second-person address, *Leaves* doggedly presses its body to us, interpellating us into an intimate encounter when we thought we were reading alone. Whitman’s penchant for conflating poems with bodies, and reading with caressing, has been critically interpreted in a number of different ways. To poststructuralist critics it has often seemed like an infuriating flaw, exposing an “archaic belief in the magical power of naming.”⁴⁶ By contrast, ecocritics have recently embraced this “mysticism” as a laudably eco-poetical attempt to communicate the “unsaid and unsayable” essence of being without falling back on the anthropocentric biases of human language.⁴⁷ Alternatively again, queer theoretical readings have suggested that Whitman cannily courts the contradiction between language and touch in order to generate rhetorical “intimacy-effects” that light up queer desire’s “world-making power” to unite “vast networks of virtual strangers” into a nation.⁴⁸ But even champions of Whitman’s counterfactually embodied poems confess that while he might have wished to write poems that touch us, he was perfectly aware of “the impossibility of doing so literally,” and thus they conclude that this gesture is best understood as a kind of rhetorical trick (Michael Moon calls it “planned catachresis”) designed to recruit our complicity in Whitman’s fantasies of physical immediacy.⁴⁹ Along these lines, Helen Vendler argues that Whitman wished to make reading “something closer to a blood transfusion or an infusion of semen,” although of course at best this dream could only exist as a speculatively “envisioned mutuality” between himself and his audience.⁵⁰ A poem obviously can’t actually touch us; Whitman just wants us to *think* about bodies and their exquisite erotics, and in doing so maybe cozen us into feeling aroused by an intimacy he can only pretend to be sharing with us.

As we’ve just seen, however, from a bioelectrical perspective there is nothing inherently mystical or metaphorical about the claim that reading

impinges on us physically: bioelectrically speaking, all communication is embodied. When Whitman complains that he “must pass with the contact of bodies and souls,” he is therefore stating a bioelectrical truism: even our prosaic *Harper’s* editor agrees that linguistic communication “literally” involves physical contact between bodies and (embodied) minds or souls (“Is not the communication from soul to soul literally, as well as figuratively, *tele-graphic*, that is, *far-writing*, or *writing from afar?*”). By the same token, (and as this editor’s ambivalent formulation suggests), bioelectrical theory does not imagine that this embodied “communication from soul to soul” is the opposite of writing or any other ostensibly more mediated mode of communication. For bioelectricity is itself a medium, and thus bioelectrical theory treats all touch as a kind of inscription. By contrast to poststructuralist logic, then, according to which the preference for embodied immediacy over linguistic mediation invariably stems from a specious metaphysics of presence, Whitman’s impatience with “paper and types” expresses a frustration at distance or attenuation, not absence. From a bioelectrical perspective, the difference between textual and bodily inscriptions is a matter of degree and not kind: as compared to writing on paper, the nervous writing that is touch is simply temporally closer to the event—the cognitive moment—of meaning. Read this way, Whitman’s conflation of body and text no longer appear so deluded or strategically misleading; instead they remind us of the material conditions of our reading.

To this end, Whitman’s characteristic use of deictics and second-person address could be understood as attempts to direct us not toward a mystical or purely rhetorical intimacy but to a concretely embodied one. Like Magritte’s self-denying still life (“ceci n’est pas une pipe”), this line’s reflexive reference to itself as “paper and types” drives my attention from the poem’s representational register to its materiality, throwing its ontic there-ness into relief. Suddenly I am acutely aware of the nap of the paper under my thumb, or the edge of the iPad digging into my palm, and in this way Whitman returns me to my body and foregrounds the physical encounter I am at that moment having with his text. In this moment we do, indeed, find ourselves rhetorically interpellated into a scene of intimacy, but one that is neither purely notional nor quite interpersonal: we are recalled to our immediate sensuous encounter with the nonhuman body of the poem itself.

But perhaps even to note the distinction between interpersonal and object relations is to miss Whitman’s point. Peter Coviello argues that Whitman invokes a more-than-genital sexuality as “the ground note of *all* human attachment,” forming “the engine that drives the human capacity

for relation to others.”⁵¹ For Coviello, this non-normative sexuality allows Whitman to envision “a kind of *seriality*” embodied in the “queer progeny” of his affectionate future readers—a vision that replaces “generational time, marked by the pairing of children and futurity,” with a style of “queer world-making, and indeed queer future-making.”⁵² In reading Whitman’s solicitations of intimacy as efforts to foreground our haptic encounter with the text, I am suggesting that this analysis might be expanded. Beyond even more-than-genital sexuality, *sensuality* is the embodied phenomenon that, for Whitman, grounds our attachment to and generative interaction with all the bodies (human and otherwise) around us.⁵³ The good news is that literally everything in the room is flirting with you.

Whitman’s bioelectrical poetics moreover also shed light on his perverse yet persistent hostility to the idea that the goal of reading is interpretation. Whitman’s early editions of *Leaves* are emphatically anti-hermeneutic: “Have you practiced so long to learn to read?” he taunts us right out of the gates; “Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?”⁵⁴ The 1860 *Leaves* doubles down on this rebuke, warning: “These leaves conning you con at peril . . . for it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book, /Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it.”⁵⁵ Instead of “conning” his words, Whitman wants us to be assailed by them, wants them to communicate as physical *rather* than linguistic objects. Thus he consistently figures his work as an involuntary emission—unpremeditated as any “ejaculation” or “barbaric yawp,” his words are “belched” sounds, “wafted with the odor of his body or breath,” exuding organically from his body like that live-oak “uttering joyous leaves all its life” by biological fiat. In one magnificent riff in “Song of Myself,” we are serially informed that instead of reading a poem we are in fact being impregnated, jetted with the stuff of arrogant republics, dilated with tremendous breath, embraced and possessed, fetched flush to Whitman’s body, and thrummed by the orotund sound of his voice. “Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity,” he expounds; “What I give I give out of myself.” And lest we mistake him to simply mean he speaks sincerely (“out of myself” as in “from the heart”), he commands us: “open your scarfed chops till I blow grit within you.”⁵⁶ Whitman relentlessly insists that his poems are touching us. And in describing his poems, *in* his poems, as not-poems, he turns the representational register of his poetry against itself. Cross-dressed as nonlinguistic objects—performing what Michael Warner terms a kind of “metadiscursive queerness”—these poems verbally profess that they have nothing to say.⁵⁷

Indeed, for all our hand-wringing over the (apparent) counter-factualism of Whitman's staged intimacies, we have been strangely unperturbed by the fact that this rhetorical pose arguably renders poetic communication unintelligible. For if, as Vendler argues, Whitman wishes to make poetry "closer to a blood transfusion or an infusion of semen," we might well ask how such an intimate physical exchange (counterfactual or not) could be a model for something that we would still recognize as poetry. How does one "read" a mouthful of grit, an injection of blood, or an "infusion" (in Vendler's delightfully chaste phrase) of semen? And if, after all, it's not "the meaning of poems" we are meant to "get at" by reading *Leaves*, then what *is* the point of reading it? Put differently, if object-poems are simply meant to affect us physically, the way grit and semen and other nonlinguistic objects do, then how will we know a poem from a handsy poet or a mouthful of sand when we see one?

At the risk of stating the obvious, most of us operate under the assumption that all poems are objects but not all objects are poems. We conventionally distinguish between the expressly communicative objects that are texts (or works of art) and, conversely, nontextual objects (hammers, grit, grass, the joints of our bodies) that may in some sense be expressive but that we do not take to be expressly trying to tell us something. Perhaps no critic writing today has had more to say about the costliness of ignoring this distinction than Walter Benn Michaels, who has extensively critiqued the idea that we might "read" nonlinguistic objects, treating objects as if they were signs. According to Michaels, the problem with this "fantasy of meaning without representation," this dream of a "text written in blood," is that unlike signs, objects (blood, grass, leaves, bodies) are not intentional and hence, although they may communicate effects or experiences (can bruise us, excite us, give us a cold), they cannot be said to communicate *meanings*.⁵⁸ The difference between experience and significance, he explains, is that experience has to do with the effect the object in fact has on us (and this is not a matter for interpretation, only attestation, the question of our individual experiences of the object), whereas significance has to do with the effect the object intends to have on us (and this is the object of interpretation, the question of the object's meaning).⁵⁹ For Michaels, then, *intention* is the additive by which we may distinguish between a text's meaning and its merely incidental effects—between its significance and what Derrida might call its "trace," or what William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley describe (in a phrase gratifyingly resonant with my present discussion) as our "psycho-galvanic reflex" to the text.⁶⁰ As Michaels argues, "Once we turn the meaning of the poem into our experience of it"—

that is, once we treat the poem as identical to the event of our reading it—"we begin to treat the poem as if it had no meaning."⁶¹

A reader like Michaels must therefore object that Whitman's embodied poetics is strictly meaningless. For Michaels, it is only insofar as the things Whitman makes are precisely *not* simply objects that they can qualify as poems in the first place. *Leaves'* bioelectric poetics would thus seem to lead poetry up a blind alley: its emphasis on the physicality of reading empties poetry of anything that would count, for Michaels at least, as meaning. By treating poems as material objects that corporeally (or "psycho-galvanically") affect us, Whitman makes poetry indistinguishable from any other species of object in the world. I might just as well "read" anything at all—by its own lights, "Song of Myself" has no more claim to my attention than the surface it's printed on, the dog snoring at my side, or the Mississippi River rolling somewhere out there in the darkness.⁶²

But as fatal as it may seem to the project of poetry, Whitman is nothing short of explicit (i.e., thoroughly intentional) about his poetry's lack of intention. He scolds us that we are doing poetry all wrong when we set out "to get at the meaning," and insists that whatever it is that his poetry exists to convey "eludes discussion and print,/It is not to be put in a book . . . it is not in this book."⁶³ Laying out his program for poetry in the 1855 preface, he argues that a poem requires neither interpretation nor comprehension to be a success:

To speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art. . . . You shall not contemplate the flight of the graygull over the bay or the mettlesome action of the blood horse or the tall leaning of sunflowers on their stalk or the appearance of the sun journeying through heaven or the appearance of the moon afterward with any more satisfaction than you shall contemplate [the poet]. The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. . . . Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or sooth[e] I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation.⁶⁴

Despite his reference to "speak[ing] in literature," the modes of expression to which Whitman compares poetic utterance here—the movements of animals, the sentiment of trees—are not only neither literary nor spoken; they're not human. The "triumph of art," he asserts, is to attain an inhuman

indifference to human understanding. “Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or sooth[e],” he sniffs; perlocutionary effects are not the essence of poems. Nor are authorial intents: “I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has,” he explains, which is to say that his poetry will not have purposes but rather consequences. For—and this is Michaels’s point—health and heat and snow cannot be said to purpose or *mean* what they do, since their effects (invigorating, heating, cooling) are unintended. Neither reducible to authorial intent nor to readerly reception, the Whitmanian poem aspires to exist among us like graygulls and blood horses and tall, leaning sunflowers—that is, as things that shape our world without speaking to us, things that “enter” us and imprint themselves on us but that we do not propose to interpretively “understand.” It is in this sense that the poem can afford to be “regardless of observation”; freed from the obligation to successfully convey a specific meaning, the poem becomes, like a horse or snow, something that does not depend upon our comprehension to be realized as an effectual or even transformative part of our shared world. As he predicts at the close of “Song of Myself,” “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,/ But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,/ And filter and fibre your blood.” Following Whitman’s bioelectric logic through, therefore, lands us at the perplexing conclusion that Whitman’s interest in embodied poems—in the bioelectrical physiology of reading and the textuality of bodies—stems from a theory of poetic intimacy and physicality that is, in the end, indifferent to poetic meaning.

Embodied Poetics and the Problem of Recognition

It may be useful at this point to take a moment to distinguish Whitman’s anti-intentionalism from other varieties of anti-intentionalism in poetry and poetic theory. In the early twentieth century, for instance, Imagist poets maintained that art’s value is independent of its capacity to mean. “A poem should not mean/ But be,” Archibald MacLeish announced in 1926, elaborating his “Ars Poetica” in lines evocative of Whitman’s preface: “A poem should be wordless/ As the flight of birds. . . . A poem should be equal to:/ Not true.” Like much of *Leaves*, MacLeish’s poem has a kind of self-canceling didacticism, clearly outlining in verse a program *for* verse to be not only non-didactic but also not meaningful. In the vein of Michaels’s critique, Robert Pinsky faults Imagism for conveying “the powerful illusion that a poet presents, rather than tells about, a sensory experience.”⁶⁵ And yet for Imagism, as MacLeish would later specify, the point of the object-poem is “not to recreate the poet’s emotion in some one else. . . .

The poem itself is finality, an end, a creation."⁶⁶ If the poetry of meaning is valuable insofar as it is instructive to readers (tells them something), the poetry of being needs no readers because being is an end in itself.

Whitman does not share MacLeish's belief in poetry's autonomy or intrinsic value; on the contrary, for Whitman every poem is inherently unfinished. For Whitman, it is neither what poetry is nor what poetry teaches us but what (or really, *whatever*) it does to us that makes it valuable.⁶⁷ As he argues, poetry is not self-contained but, rather, lives through its readership:

A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning. . . .
The touch of [the poet] tells in action. Whom he takes he takes with
firm sure grasp into live regions previously unattained thenceforward
is no rest. . . . They two shall launch off fearlessly together till the new
world fits an orbit for itself and looks unabashed on the lesser orbits of
the stars and sweeps through the ceaseless rings and shall never be
quiet again.⁶⁸

Here, poetry's value is not intrinsic but, rather, lies in its catalytic capacity, its power to transform us. Indeed, despite his "firm sure grasp" of the reader, the poet is not in control of his poem's explosive effects. Instead, he is merely a co-traveler launched "together" with his reader on a journey of "ceaseless" transformations—a process so endless (so hermeneutically pointless) that Whitman's description loses sight of it as it ripples past the known galaxy, "never [to] be quiet again." This is poetry as black market jetpack: it works by quickening readers, although it claims no responsibility for their resulting trajectories.

For some readers, including Michaels, this euphoric renunciation of authorial control more accurately marks the extinction, as opposed to the ideal, of poetic communication. But although Whitman's anti-intentionalism can seem like a promiscuous willingness to mean *anything* ("an indiscriminate hurrahing for the Universe" is how William James once characterized *Leaves*), I think we do better to recognize it as a studied critique of the idea of intentionalism, a critique that flows logically from his embodied poetics.⁶⁹ From a materialist perspective, intentionalism looks like a willfully limiting description of poetry's actual effects in the world: it would limit us to counting only those effects its author predicted, bracketing out a whole range of real, if merely "accidental" or subjective, effects that ripple out incalculably farther than the horizon of any author's original desire. From this perspective, when Whitman suggests that poetry launches "into the unknown," he is not irresponsibly denying paternity of

his work but realistically acknowledging the impossibility of predetermining the shape of its future offspring.

Thus I suggest that in asking us to recognize that poems are not just intentional communications but also radically disseminative events, Whitman opens our eyes to the unavoidably indiscreet conditions of poetry's material existence. Like Thoreau with John Brown, Whitman's sense of his poetry's value asks us to take a broader and much longer view of poetry's action—of the real if diffuse and unpredictably proliferating effects it will have unleashed. In this sense, his embodied poetics frames a theory of agential externalities, of the ungovernable aureole about every action (every touch, every utterance, every poem) that obscurely, unpredictably, and at the same time unarrestably links the present moment to outcomes and others invisible to us. And though we may well wish to codify rules—such as intentionalism in hermeneutics, for instance, or tort in the law—that carve out zones in which predictability and responsibility might more locally hold, Whitman's embodied poetics challenges us to embrace the empirical life of poetry, in all its wanton creativity.

Another way to say this might be to point out that Whitman's embodied poetics is just that—a poetics rather than a hermeneutics. As Daniel Tiffany argues in *Infidel Poetics*, poetry has always been uniquely concerned with language's sensuous dimensions (its sounds and rhythms), and this interest in the "cadaverous materiality" of language's body drives poetic language toward obscurity.⁷⁰ Sketching the history of lyric obscurity from ancient riddles and charms through the "difficulty" of high modernist poetry, Tiffany argues that a principled defiance of transparency or even intelligibility lies at the very heart of the poetic project. Indeed, for Tiffany, poetry's obscurity grounds its peculiar sociality: "Obscurity," he writes, "rather than being the principle impediment to poetry's social relevance, would provide the key to models of community derived specifically from the nature of lyric expression."⁷¹ Thus, what might otherwise seem like the obstacle to poetry's ability to communicate—its opacity, its elliptical difficulty—is, for Tiffany, the grounds of its uniquely "negative sociability."⁷² Poetry under this description does not communicate so much as it convenes, gathering speakers and hearers, authors and readers, around the incomprehensible lyric object.

Like Imagism's theory of poetic autonomy, Tiffany's theory of lyric obscurity bears some illuminating parallels to Whitman's embodied poetics, but in the end remains distinct. For Tiffany, lyric obscurity is best "regarded principally as an *event* or deed" rather than as an encrypted message, and poetry's sociality inheres not in *what* it communicates but, rather, in its

power to solicit us into this scene of (obscure, even contentless) communication.⁷³ Under this understanding of lyric, we might conclude that Whitman's embodied poetics—his denial of poetry's meaning and insistence on its physiological eventfulness—is not, in fact, antipoetic but, rather, articulates the terms of the poetic project tout court.⁷⁴ However, to see Whitman as an exemplar of Tiffany's lyric theory may be to narrow the claims that Whitman is making about obscurity. For Tiffany, the obscure objects that are poems constitute a unique class of objects—poems are especially obscure, or obscure in some special (poetic) way. For Whitman, however, obscurity is not a feature particular to poetry; it is, rather, a condition endemic to all embodied life. In other words, obscurity is not an effect of Whitman's lyrics (it is hard to imagine clearer, more prosaically candid lines than his) but rather Whitman's poetry is *about* obscurity: he is trying to articulate the philosophical problem of the obscurity of embodied being. When he says that he “cannot tell how my ankles bend . . . nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,” he's not telling a riddle; he's telling us about the riddle that ankles and wishes *are*.⁷⁵

More precisely, Whitman is noting the mystery of the way ankles and wishes work—the hows and whences of their bendings. This specification is an important one, since the real and fundamental source of ontological obscurity for Whitman is the fact that bodies are open-ended: receiving and disseminating effects, perpetually undergoing reinscription, they are materially although not metaphysically transcendent. If most of us do not wonder about our bends and bents, it is because we take these things to be expressions of our willful intentions. But as we have seen, on Whitman's bioelectric theory intentions are a kind of optical illusion. At best, they describe a misleadingly thin slice of a material history that in fact engulfs intention in its cascade of preceding causes and unpredictably sprawling effects. The lyric obscurity that he is talking about, then, and that makes him unable to say what a poem finally means (even just what it finally *causes*) is the consequence of a condition that poetry shares with literally everything: every embodied *thing* is, for Whitman, a thing in flux. To say “who I am or what I mean,” one would have to find a way to stand outside of time and space, looking back from their ends, in order to catalog the finally completed sequence of material history that passed through a given body or poem. One must write a tremendously long catalog, and even then, the catalog would not contain itself.

Put differently, there is an important difference between something that is unsayable because its meaning is encrypted (as in lyric obscurity, or as in the hermetic value of Imagism's poem-of-being) and something that is

unsayable because its meaning is *unfinished*—because the thing itself is still unfolding. And therefore, unlike the obscurity of Tiffany’s occulted subjects or the self-sufficiency of MacLeish’s autonomous ones, Whitman’s embodied subjects (lyric, human, or otherwise) confront us with a problem of recognition that is unique to his poetics. As I shall explore in the next section, the ineffability of Whitman’s processual bodies—what I have described, in the prior section, as the self-loss or identity-lessness of his continuously evolving subjects—lands us in a world in which recognition of the other would seem to be impossible because the other is perpetually changing. Accordingly, the next section asks, if the bioelectrical body does not so much confer identity as efface it by tracing our lineaments out through the vast network of our sensuous attachments, then what does this do to Whitman’s conception of racial difference and human equality? And what kind of democracy can subsist in a world of such indiscrete individuals?

*Infinity at Auction: Interracial Sympathy
in Whitman’s Democracy*

Reviving one of Spiritualism’s preferred terms for bioelectrical communication, Jane Bennett reads Whitman’s porous bodies as, above all, *sympathetic* ones. Thus she argues that Whitman’s interest in sensuous susceptibility highlights “sympathy’s capacity to imprint or act upon the flesh,” alerting us to the ways in which sympathy moves as “a more-than-human or natural force” between bodies that are “continuously affecting and being affected by each other and by atmospheres.”⁷⁶ In this way, Whitman challenges us “to form a conception of sympathy that is more than a dynamic of ‘identification’ between two or more (aspirationally) sovereign individuals,” and in doing so, Bennett suggests, Whitmanian sympathy avoids the most glaring ethical flaw in sympathy as it has conventionally been conceived. Saidiya Hartman explains that this flaw arises when “in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration”; in other words, in the act of identifying with the other, we risk overwriting the other’s identity with our own.⁷⁷ By contrast, Bennett suggest that Whitman helps us to imagine a form of sympathy that is not premised upon an imagined projection (which is also an erasure) but is instead embodied, grounded in “a trans-individual model of receptivity, affectivity, and sociality.”⁷⁸ On this reading, sympathy names a bodily susceptibility that reveals not simply our notional similarity or speculative equality with the other, but our material involvement with—our dependence upon and constitution through—the body of the other.

In this section, I propose to both extend and critique this conception of Whitmanian sympathy by examining how its substitution of mutuality for equality informs Whitman's antislavery argument in "I Sing the Body Electric." If the human body, as Whitman conceives of it, is the ever-shifting tally of an ongoing and hence ineffable creative process, then how can the politics of recognition proceed? What happens to the phenomenon of interracial sympathy when neither the subject nor the object in a given scene of identification can be identified? What, indeed, could a democratic politics without discrete persons even look like? The processualism of Whitman's embodied poetics challenges us to shift our attention from individuals and the drama of their interpersonal interactions, to systems and the ecology of their material intra-relations. In this section I propose to consider the political affordances and limitations of this embodied ontology, particularly as it informs Whitman's antislavery thought.

Although neither an ardent nor even a particularly consistent antislavery advocate, Whitman provides at least one clear enunciation of his opposition to slavery in the climactic slave auction scene of "I Sing the Body Electric."⁷⁹ As its title (appended in 1867) suggests, this poem is a paean to bioelectric embodiment, and ultimately it reproduces the contradiction of antebellum Spiritualist theology, asserting the divinity of the nervous body while pointing to the paradoxically mundane physics of its purely processual transcendence. ("The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred," Whitman affirms; "Each has his or her place in the procession / All is a procession, / The universe is a procession with measured and beautiful motion.")⁸⁰ The poem famously closes with a scene in which Whitman's speaker "helps" at a slave auction by clambering up onto the auction block to take over the work of enumerating the features of the Black bodies for sale. He does so in order to assert that every life is invaluable and that "each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off . . . just as much as you." This message of inclusion has earned the poem the reputation of being a celebration of "a fully inclusive and egalitarian democracy."⁸¹ As Martin Klammer, Betsey Erkkila, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Jimmie Killingsworth variously argue, the poem mounts a powerful "defense of black personhood" (Erkkila) and reaffirms the "sacred" nature of every body (Killingsworth).⁸²

Things get complicated, however, for the very notion of "personhood" as this poem mounts its defense of the invaluable body. Whitman affirms at the poem's outset that "the expression of the body of man or woman balks account" and its concluding scene, in which the speaker takes over

the work of accounting from an auctioneer who “does not half know his business,” offers a strikingly literal demonstration of this statement. Whitman’s own, better calculus unfolds in a series of catalogs that demonstrate the absurdity of buying and selling persons:

Gentlemen look on this curious creature,
 Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him,
 For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal
 or plant,

For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

In that head the all-baffling brain,
 In it and below it the making of the attributes of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning in
 tendon and nerve;

They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, lifelit eyes, pluck, volition. . . .

Within there runs this blood the same old blood . . the same red
 running blood;

There swells and jets his heart There all passions and desires . . all
 reachings and aspirations. . . .

This is not only one man he is the father of those who shall be
 fathers in their turns,

In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
 Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and
 enjoyments.

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring
 through the centuries?

What might you find you have come from yourself if you could trace back
 through the centuries?⁸³

By the end of this extended catalog, we would still be hard-pressed to identify the enslaved man at its center (is he old? young? tall? short?). In place of an individualizing portrait, Whitman gives us a natural history of this man’s body. The polemical force of this move is that it allows Whitman to underscore how deeply entangled this ostensibly solitary figure in fact is in the material fabric of the shared world.⁸⁴ If the institution of slavery has left this man kinless, Whitman’s catalog reminds us that his genealogy is nonetheless epically long and unbroken, that his body is the product

of a cosmic history: first the earth cohered from a nebula, then soils crumbled from bare rock, and finally myriad stages of development brought us the “cunning” design of this man’s limbs and the human passions of his blood. Thus Whitman affirms that the slave’s story is a branch of humanity’s history as a species, and extends even farther back through the larger material history of the earth and stars. If this asserts the shared history of all bodies, it also insists on each body’s limitlessness: in Whitman’s eyes, this man is the index of an unimaginably long history (“quintillions of years”) that culminates in him, and of a future that exfoliates out from him (in “countless immortal lives”) whose horizon is equally unforeseeable. Hence Whitman concludes, “This is not only one man”; the only seemingly singular figure we see is an integral part of a recombinatory and creatively unfolding physical cosmos.

No ordinary slice of antislavery rhetoric, then, this passage argues that no bid could be high enough for this enslaved man because no one can say precisely what it is that they are bidding on in the first place. “How do you know” what the true scope of his life will turn out to have been? And if you cannot know, how dare you presume to assess the value of something with such unknown parameters—to put a price on an open-ended process? If the slave auction scene is uncomfortable—and it is in a number of ways—this is not least because Whitman’s critique of slavery refuses to explicitly condemn the immorality of selling persons. The objection this passage raises is not that human life is priceless because it is “sacred” (i.e., morally exceptional to materialist systems of value); it is, more specifically, that the value of any body is *inestimable*. This man “balks account” because he is the temporary individuation of an unfolding cosmos, the momentary instantiation of a material and social process so awesomely boundless that it enfolds both his and our pasts and futures in its vast transhistorical sweep. “All is procession,” Whitman exclaims in the lines that introduce this scene: “The universe is a procession with measured and beautiful motion.” Within this processual plenum, it is impossible to circumscribe being into discrete objects, to tell where one body ends and another begins.

Critics have not always looked kindly on Whitman’s emulsifying vision. D. H. Lawrence famously accused Whitman of substituting the sloppiness of “merger” for the delicate mutuality of interpersonal sympathy.⁸⁵ More recently, Sánchez-Eppler faults Whitmanian sympathy, in terms that echo Hartman’s critique of sympathy, for failing to inspire a truly interracial sympathy. Whitman simply “dissolves the bodies” of both slave and spectator, Sánchez-Eppler observes, effacing the enslaved

man's specificity in the process of uniting slave and spectator into an undifferentiated, transpersonal whole.⁸⁶

We may now be in a position to see how this "failure" is not just integral to this scene but structural to Whitman's poetics and its underlying ontology. Indeed, one now begins to see why Whitman volunteers for the auctioneer's job, for he has done more than any other poet to show how the auctioneer's catalog might be a kind of spiritual (even Spiritualist) exercise—a kind of chanting hymn to the transcendental nonsingularity, the finally unnumberable multiplicity, of any one thing. A solitary slave at auction is also a prehistoric globe, revolving seasonal cycles, rich republics, and countless future lives; a poet is also a book of poems, a leaf of grass under our bootsoles. Everything exceeds its immediate body and in this sense, equally enmeshed in a sympathetically united cosmos, everything is ultimately one. But what could equality look like in this sprawling, heterogeneous unity? Is the sameness of two things that are conjoined (one) the same as the sameness of two things that are comparable (equal)? That is, is asserting our universal material mutuality really tantamount to establishing our universal moral equality? What would it mean to be equal to something that is, in the final analysis, not just *like* but *part of* yourself?

Thus we may begin to appreciate the nonhumanism of Whitman's argument with slavery, and the extent to which it undermines the metaphysics of personhood in which democracy and racial equality have both traditionally traded. In the liberal humanist tradition enshrined in the U.S. founding documents, "all men are created equal" and are vested with certain "unalienable Rights." From this premise, as Douglass saw, the question of whether or not slavery is consistent with this principle of equality before the law depends upon establishing whether or not slaves should be recognized as "men," and as such endowed with what Chief Justice Taney, in his *Dred Scott* decision, terms "rights which the white man was bound to respect." And thus, as I have suggested across the preceding chapters of this book, the effort to establish the humanity of the slave is how race, as a system of visible differences and attitudes toward those differences, came to seem so important. Look at this hair, this skin, the turn of this hip: do you, white American, recognize this body as categorically like yours, or different? Can you see yourself in this body, feel sympathy for it?

Whitman moots these questions of recognition; in the ontology that he articulates and makes the marrow of his revisionary poetics, equality operates by a very different logic. As the auction scene in "I Sing the Body Electric" makes clear, there can be no politics of recognition for the Whitmanian self because this self is fundamentally unrecognizable—it is

impossible to even determine the shape of the phenomenon that it (they?) is (will have been?). Instead, the egalitarian ethos of his verse, such as it is, turns on the notion that the sameness of material *contiguity* (you are physically connected to me) can be seamlessly substituted for the sameness of moral *equality* (you are as good as me). *Leaves* flirts with this conversion from its outset: “Every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you,” it begins, provocatively refusing to choose between the moral claim that you and I are of equal worth (your atoms are as good as mine) and the empirical claim that you and I share matter (my atoms may one day be yours—check your bootsoles).⁸⁷ Indeed, throughout his first three editions, Whitman continually works the slippage between material mutuality, affective intimacy, and moral equality, but however closely he conflates them, it is not clear that these modes of imagining political community are interchangeable. The fluidity of the Whitmanian person defies the calculus of equality, dissolving the units (here persons) that equality compares into an undifferentiable unity. His defense of the Black body’s equality is thus arguably useless in the same way that his poetics is, strictly speaking, useless: both highlight the illimitable natural history of bodies and poems, but since empirical expansiveness is a feature of every object in Whitman’s ontology, it does not suggest how or why these objects *specifically* ought to be valued.⁸⁸ What legal rights are due to human bodies as opposed to grass or blood or a poem? Why should we read a poem as opposed to blood or grass or a human body?

Like his antihermeneutic poetics, then, Whitman’s materialist account of persons is anti-identitarian. Stripping both poems and persons of conventional subjecthood (individual identity or intentional meaning), he returns them to us as empirically infinite processes, entangled aspects of a procreant “reality . . . materialism first and last imbueing.”⁸⁹ At once disconcertingly modest and astoundingly epic, this processualism does away with identity by proliferating it such that both poems and persons threaten to lose their normative or ethical force. We are no longer tasked with recognizing what they “truly” mean, who they “really” are. Instead, Whitman’s politics follow his poetics in inviting us to marvel at the ineffable (although not otherworldly) wonder of interconnected being, to acknowledge how “every spear of grass and the frames and spirits of men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakably perfect miracles all referring to all.”⁹⁰

The force of this admirably ecological vision—the truly exquisite complexity of the relational world it discloses—is therefore also what seems to render it politically inert. For without discrete units it is not clear that there

can be either democracy or equality as we know them; there is only, and always already, attachment and unity. Moreover, even if we permit ourselves to act *as if* the temporary organizations of matter we call bodies were countably distinct, the fact remains that, by Whitman's lights, literally every material body (whether human, animal, vegetable, mineral, or textual) is incalculable, and thus invaluable. This confronts us with the problem of a moral polity constituted by literally everything. Conceived in terms of its material interinvolvement, this polity displaces the question of its constituents' similarities and differences and thus bypasses the politics of representation and recognition that subtend the politics of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and species rights as we currently know them. As I shall discuss in Chapter 4 and the Coda, the problem of making this processual ontology speak to the concerns of embodied specificity and racial difference continues to trouble contemporary posthumanism today.

In the foregoing three chapters I have been excavating a materialist strain of antislavery thought that began to crystallize in the writings of Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman in the 1850s as an embodied alternative to biological racism. This antislavery materialism coalesces in their work neither as a consistent political platform nor as an explicitly codified theory but, rather, as a tendency of thought arising from their efforts to reimagine "the human" in light of burgeoning midcentury discourses of human embodiment. Departing from both mainstream abolitionism (which largely denied the relevance of bodily difference to human equality) and biological racism (which argued that certain bodies—Black, native, female—are biologically determined and hence naturally inferior), these authors embrace the materiality of human being and use it to dismantle the notion of biological hierarchy. In doing so, their writings invoke a physical cosmos whose dense interdependencies preclude the erection of racial and speciological hierarchy (Douglass), in which the ceaseless drift of evolutionary change belies racial and speciological essentialism (Thoreau), and in which the processual becomings of our permeable bodies blur the distinction between entities (Whitman). In place of racial science's static typological system, these antebellum materialisms give us an anti-essentialist ontology in which identity is contingent and fluid, shaped by the dynamic interrelation of biological and cultural forces.

In navigating this third way between disembodied antislavery and biological racism, these authors invite us to radically rethink the category of the human. This effort was, at least in part, strategic: a response not only

to the rising cachet of empirical science but also to the mutual support liberal and racist ideologies lent each other in the nineteenth century. Indeed, as we have seen, although liberal humanism's universalism and racism's hierarchism would seem to be antithetical, biological racism in fact quite happily invoked liberal humanism's account of the human as a form of being that is uniquely independent of the material order. The figure of the autonomous, disembodied liberal self funded midcentury racism's hierarchical distinction between "fully" human white persons (whose characteristic racial trait is to be rationally independent of their bodies) and "lesser" forms of racialized, gendered, bestialized, and objectified beings, whose identities are biologically predetermined. Thus despite its ostensible materialism, antebellum racism shared liberalism's fundamental assumption that the most fully human was the least embodied; meanwhile, despite its ostensible universalism, antebellum liberalism needed the fatally embodied form of life racism supplied in order to secure its own self-definition. As Russ Castronovo observes, this reciprocal exchange yields a singularly deathly episteme: between the human citizen whose body is effaced by the purifying fires of liberal universalism and, by contrast, the dehumanized noncitizen who is sentenced "to excessive and lethal embodiment," this modern liberal-raciological order proves singularly hostile to embodied life.⁹¹ Stepping outside the deadly either/or of a disaffectedly abstract liberal personhood on one side and a dehumanized materiality on the other, Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman demonstrate that empiricism's entry into antebellum political reasoning in fact afforded a wider range of embodied discourses than these two alternatives allow. Insisting upon the materiality of all humans, these authors frame a tentative and experimental but provocative counterdiscourse that resists biological racism and points beyond liberal humanism's conception of the human.

At the same time, as I have tried to show, this revisionary materialism was not without cost to these authors insofar as their forays into embodied thinking undermined aspects of the progressive liberalism and romantic individualism with which they are broadly associated. Their incipient materialism often appears as a subversively contrapuntal theme in their thought, at odds with the liberal commitments they elsewhere espouse. Douglass's strategic embrace of animality is, for instance, in tension with his determination to establish beyond doubt his race's claim to the rights and privileges of full humanity. Thoreau's appeal to evolution as an agent of moral change conflicts with his faith in the power of the conscientious individual to effect profound personal and political reform; and Whitman's sense of himself as an expansively interconnected material plenum ("a kosmos") is

disconcertingly at odds with his sense of himself as a discrete and self-possessed liberal subject (“Walt Whitman”) and representative of a class (“an American, one of the roughs”). This is to suggest, then, that there is a distinctly illiberal tendency in the materialist swings of these authors’ thought—that their explorations of human ontology undermine their appeals to human rights, agency, and selfhood as liberal humanism constructs them. This heretical tendency marks the opening of their work onto radically new modes of imagining the human—to alternative epistemes that are not only antiracist but whose antiracism moreover transforms our conception of human being and its modes of community from the ground up.

In the modern politics of democratic pluralism, the effort to end racism and other exclusions based on embodied identity involves a struggle at once *for* inclusion and against incorporation into a disembodied universalism that ignores or denies the embodied difference of these lived identities. The challenge of this pluralistic politics of sympathy is thus to insist upon individual and embodied specificity while also asserting the equality of humans and universality of human rights. The material processualism that subtends these antebellum antislavery materialisms can light up the difficulty of making contemporary posthumanist discourses of ontological fluidity—in assemblage theory, new materialism, and “affirmative” biopolitics, for instance—speak to discourses of racial and social justice. As I shall explore in Chapter 4 and the Coda, although like Douglass, Thoreau, and Whitman many posthumanists today understand themselves to be working toward an expanded democratic politics and in the service of a more radically egalitarian and inclusive ethics, it is not clear that the materialist ontology they embrace can support the redeemed democracy they envision. At the very least, I shall suggest that this conversation, already begun, is one that we now need to be having.