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# "I Celebrate Myself, and Sing Myself": Whitman's Transformative Words of Bodily Empowerment in *Leaves of Grass*

It has been a pervasive idea in many cultures to separate humans into components: our physical bodies and our metaphysical souls. This division likely hails from our propensity to categorize things; and perhaps, a little bit of fear. For by categorizing ourselves into both physical and spiritual presences we can avoid the fact that our physical bodies must die (and be recycled back into the cosmos according to Walt Whitman) and rest easy knowing that our true selves are not bound to mortality. However, in so sanctioning this split of our "selves" into two we often detrimentally diminish the body, because of its nasty habit of relentlessly reminding us of our tether to the world. The resulting placement of the soul (or metaphysical self) as superior to the body fostered the devaluing of the physical self to the extent that the body was considered unclean or shameful in many cultures. The true malice of these adverse results is that they have not disappeared from Western society. In promoting this disconnect between our bodies and the rest of us, we have done humanity the disservice of blocking off a central aspect of ourselves and our experience. It takes work to remove the layers of societal conditioning that has informed us not to be in touch with our bodies. This is where the body positivity movement comes in. Based on principles of self-love and inclusivity, the body positivity movement seeks to disrupt the traditional ways we are taught to view our bodies. It rejects messages that denigrate bodies of different sizes, races, genders, sexual orientations, ages, etc. It is with this movement in mind

that we can approach the words of Walt Whitman. Before his 19th century America was prepared to accept it, Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* that shares an uncanny resemblance to the rhetoric used in the modern body positivity movement. Because of the lingering societal stigmas surrounding the body (i.e. the repression of its functions and sexuality via cultural discourse) and the similarity of Walt Whitman's language to that of contemporary self-help/body positivity movements that use empowering words to combat those messages, the reading of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is as liberating and relevant as ever.

If we are to extrapolate the necessity of body positivity in our modern age, it is first productive to assess the origins and shifts (if any) of the Western culture's ideas about the body. Beginning with, well, the beginning; Western civilization can be traced to a foundation in Ancient Greece, therefore looking at the concepts presented in famed philosopher Plato's work, *Symposium*, is a good place to start. This classic text details the gathering of notable Greek figures where they recite their varying ideas about Eros, the Greek god of love and desire. The speeches of two characters are of particular significance to this present discussion on shame; those of Pausanias and Eryximachus. Pausanias's speech reflects the traditional impulse to separate proper love from love that entails sexual pleasure:

> It follows, therefore, that there is a Common as well as Heavenly Love, depending on which goddess is Love's partner…. Common Aphrodite's love is himself truly common…. This, of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, and to the body no more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act. Whether they do it honorably or not is of no concern. That is why they do whatever comes their way,

> sometimes good, sometimes bad; and which one it is, is incidental to their purpose. (Plato 874-875)

Here we see an early example where the language used to describe those carrying out normal actions of sexual satisfaction are deemed as vulgar by those who are determined to separate humans from their instinctual bodily functions because it is "distasteful" or "uncivilized". This is also evidence of the stratification of the body and soul, Pausanias' words imply that to be attracted to another's body is "vulgar" which inherently devalues the soul's vessel, the body. The synonymity with which Pausanias associates "common" and "vulgar" furthers the idea that not all forms of love, attraction, bodies, or couplings are equal – an elitist thought that would likely horrify the democratic Whitman. Another one of the unfortunate ideas presented in *Symposium* comes from the character Eryximachus, a doctor. He says: "we must be careful to enjoy his [Love's] pleasures without slipping into debauchery – this case…is strictly parallel to a serious issue in my own field, namely, the problem of regulating the appetite so as to be able to enjoy a fine meal without unhealthy aftereffects" (Plato 879-880). This Greek preoccupation with moderation contributes to the belief that humans must sanction off parts of their bodies lest they revert to their baser animal nature. The only "debauchery" that one might "slip" into by merely having too much sex – if there even is such a thing – are the ensuing ramifications in the form of cultural ostracization carried out on the individual. Though I by no means suggest everyone turn hedonist, this notion of "regulation" means that people are taught to fear what are totally natural functions and urges of the body, thus forgoing the opportunity to experience the body's potential because of fear and shame.

Continuing our historical journey, we move past antiquity into The Middle Ages and beyond, all of which are headlined by the dominant religion, Christianity. Christianity and its

denominations not only take on the Greek views about the body, they extort and expand upon them by popularizing the idea of man's sinful nature. Despite our being "made in God's image" the ease with which man is claimed to fall into depravity means the God-fearing person must constantly police their body and its urges (more like natural functions, but you know). In his comprehensive philosophical work, *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault explains how during the time of the Counter Reformation (the mid-1500s), the Catholic church altered the definition of confession – a technique of policing already employed by Christianity – to extend what was considered sinful: "According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything had to be told" (1: 19). The expansion of the realm of what is considered sinful or shameful to include every facet of the body causes us to distrust ourselves and betray our bodies with said distrust. There is ample evidence for this idea in works of the period, one such being the morality play, *Everyman*. Using the metaphorical technique to have the titular character stand for all mankind we can see the dialect for bodily hate standard at the time. The character "God" laments: "For, [if] I leave the people thus alone / In their life and wicked tempests, / Verily they will become much worse than beasts" (47-49). It is through the vehicle of "God" that religion entrenches the belief that humans must be afraid of our own impulses, and that if we are weak enough to succumb to those impulses, we deserve to be punished. In confirmation of this idea, Everyman, in his attempt to relieve himself of his sins before he dies, says: "In the name of the Holy Trinity / My body sore punished shall be: / Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh!" (610-12). Everyman's understanding that he must punish his body because of "the sin of the flesh"

exemplifies the harm of a society that projects these views on its people. In her book, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, body positive ambassador Sonya Renee Taylor helps explain the transfusion of body shame, "Toxic messages become our internal outside voice. After we've ingested enough body shame, the declarations become the narrative through which we speak about our own bodies, often without even noticing it" (67). The toxic messages that Christianity preached did not disappear, they leeched into new movements of science and medicine that, along with the continued strong-hold of religion, proliferated into the discourse of Walt Whitman's Victorian era.

As the totalitarian regime of religion waned in the West, the new products of the Enlightenment and Industrialization, the beginnings of modern science, rose to power. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault posits that science is a product of its time, therefore the foundational science of sexuality that came about in the 18th and 19th centuries is founded in the beliefs of the systems of power that came directly before them. What seemed like advancements were merely transmutations of the same ideas of body shame. What's worse is that new advancements used the veil of modernity to disguise and impart further their rhetoric of body shame. Foucault explains:

> Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination. (1: 36)

So the more we "learned", the more health and science became trusted discourses, the more we sought to determine what was right and what was wrong about the body. The improvements made by the globalization during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries were also fostered by one of the greatest atrocities against bodies the West has ever seen: slavery. Because the West was founded on the principles of body shame and "we've been taught that our bodies are entities to control and subjugate", that made it easy for the powers that be to convince Westerners that it was (and remains) acceptable to treat those with bodily differences as lesser (Taylor 69). This being the environment in which Whitman inhabited helps establish the urgency with which a book like *Leaves of Grass* was needed. In *The Erotic Whitman*, Vivian R. Pollack uses biographical evidence to theorize that the Victorian society that molded Whitman "inhibited his ability to feel unselfconsciously valued as a person and for himself" (84). Therefore, Whitman's creation of *Leaves of Grass* served to liberate both himself and his readers from the stifling world of body negativity.

Though we have thankfully come to our senses about the wrongs of slavery, the ideologies behind it – as explained in the aforementioned line from Sonya Renee Taylor – still inform how we treat both our own bodies and the bodies of others. In many ways, the messages we receive from modern day sources (including media, institutions, and the culture at large) teach us to enslave our own bodies. This ranges from teachings that tell us to police our appetites – both sexual and sustenance wise – ideas adapted from Eryximachus' lesson on moderation. The subjugation and misinformation conveyed about (female) reproductive health via lawmakers and educators perpetuate the concept of the "sin of the flesh" expressed in *Everyman*, as well as assist in the controlling of other's bodies by the ruling body. The similarity of these examples

from the past to the discourse used for body shame today alert us to the dire necessity for ideas that combat them so that we may begin to restore our relationship with our bodies.

Witnessing the speaker's own self-confidence in "Song of Myself" is one of the key methods that Whitman uses to incite a liberating transformation in his own readers. He opens the poem with this: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1-3). Along with the title, the first line of "Song of Myself" immediately positions the speaker as a person with unflinching self-confidence. Then the subsequent lines inform readers to celebrate themselves as well because of our connection to the self-assured speaker on an atomic level. This preliminary establishment contextualizes that all of the ensuing instances of self-acceptance and love in "Song of Myself" are meant to apply to the reader as well as the speaker.

As a basis to our understanding of Whitman's goal for *Leaves of Grass*, he stated throughout his lifetime, and in various ways, that his aim was to change his reader. He often does so in not so subtle ways, in fact, he demands it. In an oft quoted line from "Song of Myself", he exclaims, "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (501-2). This, along with the abundance of other sentiments like it, informs us of the non-conformist uprising that Whitman is trying to incite. By removing doors that would conceal parts of ourselves, Whitman urges us to liberate the parts of ourselves that we have closed off. When it comes to the body, the unshackling from conformity comes in the speaker's command for the reader to disrobe: "Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded, / I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no," (145-46). The speaker is telling (with encouragement) the reader to shed social constraints by "undraping". Clothes act as symbols of oppression that the speaker urges us to cast off. As literal fabric shields for our bodies, clothing

is a tool of an oppressive society because by concealing our bodies, it implies that there should be shame of our natural form. He also proclaims his sage omniscience in seeing the true human form despite our attempts to conceal it. Not only does Western society demand we wear clothes, it also creates rules deeming how we should bear garments (especially during Whitman's native Victorian era). This removes what would be an expressive outlet and makes it a monotonous, shame-inducing one. Readers get to see the speaker exercising his autonomy over his dress: "conformity goes to the fourth-remov'd, / I wear my hat as I please indoors or out" (396-97). The speaker here is taking back clothing as a means of creative expression. The adornment of our bodies can be freeing or restrictive depending on which entity controls it.

By sheathing our bodies with clothes, we are containing our most powerful instrument for receiving sensory information. Therefore, Whitman compels us to discard our garbs in leading by example: "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for [the natural world] to be in contact with me" (18-20). Whitman urges the realization that Taylor expresses, that "we did not start life in a negative partnership with our bodies", and in these lines from "Song of Myself", he exemplifies a return to our natural state by becoming "undisguised" – naked and free from the constraints of shame (Taylor 6). It is with this lens of "unscrewing the doors from their jambs" that we can look at how Whitman tackles bodily differences.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass* readers get to experience Whitman's advocation for all human bodies. Accepting bodily differences is a key aspect to our journey's toward individual self-love according to body positivity principles. In *The Body is Not an Apology*, Sonya Renee Taylor explains, "In our society, normal is the pathway to worthy and beautiful" (26). Adherence to normalcy denies the great diversity of bodies. Whitman rejects typical notions of normalcy

that alienate: “I will not have a single person slighted or left away” (“Song” 374). And in carrying out this mission of collective embrace, he makes total adoption of inclusivity the new “normal”. In “Song of Myself” section 10, lines 189-198, the speaker lovingly cares for a runaway slave – a subjugated body on its way to freedom – as a representation of how we should treat humanity as well as tend to ourselves. In only a few sections later the speaker delivers his observations of another black man: “The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of his polish’d and perfect limbs. / I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there, / I go with the team also” (“Song” 229-31). In opposition to the exoticizing and othering typically done to persons of color at the time, the speaker admires the black man’s body and takes outward appreciation a step further by joining him in comradery.

Another tool Whitman applies to the mission of inclusivity is the use of his famously democratic catalogs to include/express appreciation for traditionally marginalized bodies. This methodology is exemplified in sections 15 & 16 of “Song of Myself”:

> The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open’d lips,
> The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
> The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
> (Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)
> The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great Secretaries, (304-8)

By compiling lists of ostracized bodies adjacent to accepted ones, Whitman promotes acceptance of everybody. In this excerpt, Whitman subverts typical cultural stigmas against sex workers by including the parenthetical line admonishing others for admonishing her; and by placing her in the company of the President and his Secretaries, he dismantles the hierarchy of bodies society creates out of class structures. These catalogs also have the power in their simultaneous

specificity and anonymity (the labeling of a person's occupation but not a name) to be relatable to readers of all sorts, therefore strengthening the ability of Whitman's words to transform their negative self-image.

Whitman's diversity also translates to gender issues where he appreciates male and female bodies, placing them on an equal plane, freeing them from the oppressive expectations placed on them by society. Evidence of this abounds in "I Sing the Body Electric", Whitman frankly states it here: "The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred, / No matter who it is, it is sacred" (84-85). One criticism of the body positivity movement that can be said is that it can be too focused on female empowerment. Naturally, the focus on female bodies is understandable because of how patriarchal society has objectified, repressed, and abused the female form. However, those of the male gender are not free from the shackles of body shame, the same ideas that paint female bodies as delicate objects expect men to be hulking extreme examples of ruggedness. Therefore, Whitman's equal appreciation of male and female bodies makes his poetry traverse terrain that some 21st century thinkers have not yet overcome.

It is also evident in these catalogs that Whitman saw himself in the varying types of bodies he compiled. Of them, he says, "all these I feel or am", alluding to the torment he felt by witnessing the ills enacted on bodies ("Song" 837). Yet despite the injustice that evidently pained him, Whitman also uses depictions of slaves and prostitutes (persons whose identity is fully their body) to sing his songs about himself and the physical form. In her essay, "To Stand Between: Walt Whitman's Poetics of Merger and Embodiment", Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues that Whitman uses images of the slave at auction like we see in "I Sing the Body Electric", section 7 to emphasize the corporeal self. In making statements like, "I am the hounded slave," Whitman was trying "to assert the corporeality of his own identity" ("Song" 838; Sanchez-

Eppler 854). Without denying the wrongs of slavery, in performing this association, Whitman disrupts the traditional tone of degradation that is associated with an individual who is "reduced" to a mere body. The reality Whitman wants us to realize is that the body is the most tangible iteration of the self which should be embraced and celebrated as much as, if not more than other components of the individual. This involves confronting the bodies that we have hidden away, and Whitman shows us how.

Beginning with tackling our conditioned response to ignore our physical bodies, we must acknowledge and appreciate their (our) existence. Though there are a myriad of theories about what parts make up the whole of a human's being, there is no denying that we have a body, a physical personhood. Sonya Renee Taylor asserts: "Beneath our many layers of body shame, we know that bodies are neither wrong nor right. They just are" (20). And in perhaps the most prime example of self-help/affirmation rhetoric Whitman confirms that with his delivery of these lines: "I exist as I am, that is enough, / If no other in the world be aware I sit content, / And if each and all be aware I sit content" ("Song" 413-15). These words refute the idea that we must continually strive to work past our deficiency, our existence is enough. We are too quick to dismiss the body as the unfortunate caveat to our human experience, when in reality we owe our body all of what we can call our experience; it is literally the vessel that transports us through the physical world. Further evidence of Whitman's acceptance of physicality as part of his identity can be seen in his salutation midway through "Song of Myself". He introduces himself as "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding," (497-98). Rather than deny that his identity is physical, Whitman embraces it, and in that way, exalts everyone's existence as physical beings. The body is our substance.

After unveiling our bodies, Whitman encourages us to explore, investigate, become familiar with, and ultimately celebrate the varying parts of our bodies. In "Song of Myself" he says, "I will you to be a bold swimmer," (1232). Whitman acknowledges that the dive into subconscious body shame and the physical exploration of our bodies is difficult, but he imparts his strength on his readers by "willing" us to be bold – a method commonly used by body positive coaches as well. As a direct challenge to the body shame discourse pervading the Victorian era (the less subtle philosophy that deems parts of the body gross, the remnants of which today's body shame is based on) Whitman proclaims: "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest." ("Song" 57-58). Whitman takes readers on a journey of the body in "I Sing the Body Electric", staging a confrontation of its parts in the final catalog in section 9. He begins his list with the "Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears," continuing on until he reaches, "The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones," (133-61). Rather than just encouraging readers to explore their bodies, Whitman takes our hand and guides us on our exploration, ensuring nothing is left out so that we may share in his marvel at the human form.

Whitman not only marveled at agreed upon miracles of the body like procreation, he saw the everyday functions of the body as miraculous capabilities:

> Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.
>
> Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,
>
> The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
>
> This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

> If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it, ("Song" 523-27)

In his book, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful*, Harold Aspiz explains the purpose behind passages like this: "by idealizing his body, Whitman created a model that his fellow Americans could emulate. By hallowing his bodily drives and processes, he sanctified the animal element in everyone's life" (239). Looking at Whitman's passage again, through the use of "I", we know the speaker is representing himself, the speaker is modeling the worshiping of their body. Witnessing this unapologetic celebration of another is inspiring enough, but because of the tactful use of poetry – a form of literature designed to be read aloud – Whitman compels readers into telling themselves that they too are divine and deserving of worship. This pronoun choice is often employed by body positive or self-help writers and coaches because it is a technique of subconscious trickery that breaks down the negative narratives we have absorbed about our bodies and begins to alter it.

The wonder of the body on the basis of its ability to provide sensory information is another of the chief reasons Whitman encourages commemoration of it. Whitman acknowledges that the body is the only means through which people get to experience the natural world he valued so dearly. That is why he wished to "go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked," so that no part of his body would be deprived of sensation ("Song" 19). Later in "Song of Myself", the speaker wonders: "Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity," (619). The material we gather from our sensations provides new information that we are able to encode into our ever-evolving selves. Immediately before this line the speaker asserts:

> Mine is no callous shell,
>
> I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,

They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy, ("Song" 614-17)

In this moment, the speaker denies the idea (that pertained especially to women) that bodies are frigid beings that do not crave sensation. This is another instance where Whitman employs the self-help technique of subconscious trickery, making readers assert their sensuality in the same breath as the speaker. The second stanza's first line from this excerpt is akin to the personal practices suggested by body positive teachers who encourage people seeking to love themselves to undertake actions combined with mantras to update their body perspective to one of celebration, like Whitman. For example, Sonya Renee Taylor's third suggested practice in her book, *The Body is Not an Apology*, is called "unapologetic action" where she prods her readers to get to know the bodies they have neglected, explaining, "by getting to know them, we open ourselves to deeper levels of pleasure, care, and ultimately radical love" (71). People are taught to become afraid of their body's sensations through trauma imparted by the stigmas surrounding the innate "sin of the flesh". Both Whitman and Taylor reject that notion, "argu[ing] for sexuality [as well as mere sensuality] on the basis of organicism – that the parts of the body work to create the whole and that therefore no one part can be out of place or vile" (Ceniza 119). Taylor also stresses that the practice of "unapologetic action", specifically carried out through her methods of "exploration, examination, and ecstasy" (all tenets Whitman covers, mind you) not only increases the pleasure one gains with one's own body, but also with a partner (107). This makes the journey to self-love all the more pivotal for humanity as a whole to achieve. The body's capacity for sensation directly correlates to its capacity for pleasure – a capability that Whitman wrote extensively on.

Sexuality intersects all the capabilities of the body; it is sensation, function, expression, pleasure, and human connection. Thus, in his book, *In Walt We Trust: How a Queer Socialist Poet Can Save America from Itself*, John Marsh writes "if Whitman wanted to write about the complete human identity, he could not ignore something as essential to our identity as sex" (112). And he certainly did not. If a simple touch is enough to "quiver" the poet "to a new identity", then what could sex do for him? Well, for one thing, Whitman refused to deny physical urges, stating, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites," ("Song" 522). This jabs at the Western tradition that would have people deny their bodies and desires. Disillusioned by the misleading popular sexual scripts of his day, Whitman boldly asserts an unapologetic eroticism in his poetry and sets his sights on "the recovery of sexual facts" for himself and his readers (Pollack 81). In "A Woman Waits for Me", Whitman proclaims, "Sex contains all, bodies, souls, / Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations, / ...These are contain'd in sex, as parts of itself, and justifications of itself" (3-8). In Whitman's eyes, sexual desire is as natural as scratching an ich. It is for this reason that the poet often depicts sexual scenes in natural settings (or with nature itself) to create a positive association between sex and the body for his readers.

Much like Whitman takes on the task of confronting us with the different bodies of people of color, he uses his power as the poet to speak for sexually repressed bodies. He declares: "Through me forbidden voices, / Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil, / Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd" ("Song" 516-18). No analysis of Whitman as a sexual liberator would be complete without looking at section 11 of "Song of Myself". In the sequence, the speaker delivers a narrative about a wealthy 28-year-old woman yearning to be with men she witnesses bathing in a river. It is an acknowledgment of the crippling and isolating effect of society's war on sex. The feelings of dissatisfaction the woman

experiences emphasize how vital sexual expression is to live a fulfilled life. The woman is finally awarded space for her plight to be heard, the speaker gives the woman a voice, "I see you," he says, using his platform to speak for and liberate others ("Song" 206). Lack of acknowledgment and subsequent acceptance of societal ills perpetuates them. Therefore, this section, as well as the rest of *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's campaign of defiance. This scene also highlights the harmful disparities between the expectations of sexuality of men and women. The men are free with their bodies while the woman is stuck in her trappings of society, dreaming to be liberated. Though "the unnamed woman in Whitman's poem remains within the safe and sterile confines of her lonely house", she is given a metaphysical liberation via both her mind and the speaker's recitation of her story (Graham 577). In performing this for the unnamed woman, Whitman demonstrates early in *Leaves of Grass* how he intends to execute a similar liberation for his reader.

The power of sex stems not only from its ability to nurture individual liberation and self-love, but also from its ability to conjoin the entirety of a person (body and soul) with another; and as the poet of democratic unity, Whitman often focuses on sex as a means of inter-bodily communication. Whereas the common Western view of physical couplings tries to remove the body from the equation and focus solely on the unification of the mind, Whitman professes the undeniable yearning to be in the company of another person's body. In "I Sing the Body Electric", the speaker fantasizes over a masculine farmer, saying, "You would wish long and long to be with him, you would wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might touch each other" (44). Touch then, the physical exploration of a body, is the most earnest way one can connect to another (and oneself). That is why the lonely bather from "Song of Myself" section 11 is so lonely, because she is cut off from the touch of other humans as well as herself. Whitman's

poetry on the importance of physical interaction of bodies helps release readers from their own preconceived notions about sex imparted by society. One notable example is relayed by Nancy Lewis Tuten in her essay, "The Language of Sexuality: Walt Whitman and Galway Kinnell", where she explains the influence Walt Whitman had on 20th century poet Galway Kinnell's writings about sex. She puts forth: "Sexuality is, for Kinnell and Whitman, the most sacred dimension of human physicality and the ultimate means of communication between two individuals," citing proof in a statement by Kinnell: "'I think it's the opposite of what Plato thought, […] I think that if people know each other only mind to mind they hardly know each other at all'" (qtd. in Tuten). The point Kinnell refutes by Plato is an example of the detrimental narrative disseminated by Western society that prolongs the disconnection people have between themselves, their bodies, and others. Both Whitman and the body positivity movement abolish this narrative of incorporeal superiority in their work.

The physicality that makes sex so vital to expression and pleasure also applies to the other ways in which humans can express ourselves through our bodies. Movement of the body is an outward projection of our inner selves and a tool of communication. There is a reason for the term "body language". Whitman writes, "And in man or woman a clean, strong, firm-fibred body, is more beautiful than the most beautiful face" ("I Sing" 126). Though the face is an undeniable component of the body, Whitman separates them here to emphasize how vital the body, aside from one's countenance, is to express oneself. In lieu of dissecting only vocal communication, Whitman focuses on the reading of bodies as the truer method of discerning one's own or another person's feelings/thoughts. Outside sources would have us stifled from moving physically via constricting or oppressive clothes or metaphysically by convincing us of the inborn shame of our beings. The body is *the* means by which we express ourselves, which is

why affirmation coaches impart the importance of outlets like dance for rebuilding the severed connection between our bodies and the rest of us. Whitman is sure to do this too, saying, “I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;” reminding his readers of the pleasure their body can bring them (“Song” 59).

Of all the harmful messages that society pushes on us and our bodies, they share the concept of belittlement. Whether it be smothering our boisterous personalities, the complete denial of our sexuality, or the literal downsizing of our measurements, “we have shrunk the full expression of ourselves because we have been convinced that our bodies and therefore our very beings are deficient” (Taylor 36). This notion of “shrinking” relates to one of the largest aims of the body positivity movement which is the advocation of size inclusivity. “Fat-shaming” is an iteration of body shame that has risen to prominence particularly in the modern age where society promotes the value of thin bodies and convinces the masses to reduce themselves in order to increase their worth – a misguided message that forever eludes most people. This fear of fat saddles people with body dysmorphia that consumes their entire feelings of self-worth. To contest that, Whitman announces: “I chant the chant of dilation or pride, / We have had ducking and deprecating about enough, / I show that size is only development.” (“Song” 428-30). An exaltation of vastness can provide relief for readers, and these powerful words provoke the realization that we indeed have had enough of depreciating ourselves. Also in “Song of Myself”, we find another example of a mantra to follow, this time applicable to fat positivity: “I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious,” (544). In admitting this, Whitman gives readers permission to do so as well.

Having taken readers on the transformative journey with their body’s, Whitman ultimately aims to harmonize all aspects of the self. Whitman dismantles the cultural

configuration that positions the soul on a higher pedestal than the body. The speaker announces: "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul. / Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen, / Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn" ("Song" 52-54). There are many instances in *Leaves of Grass* like this where Whitman presents the necessity of dichotomies while simultaneously blurring the line between them. He acknowledges that the significance of the soul cannot be realized until "the seen" part of the self (the body) is acknowledged as much as the soul. Whitman's attitude towards sight expressed here also supports his treatment of different bodies. In "I Sing the Body Electric", Whitman states his mission as one to "discorrupt [bodies], and charge them full with the charge of the soul" (4). He continues his pontification: "And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul? / And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" (7-8). The body houses and protects the soul, and without our bodies, the soul would shrivel up and perish. While the soul does inform the body, the body and its senses are also vital in informing the soul. Without the information delivered by our bodily senses or the experiences our bodies go through on the physical plane, our souls would have no way of establishing context for our identities.

Rather than adhering to the idea that our bodies and souls are separate entities, Whitman refutes this notion with the many sensual couplings of the body and soul. If we are to look for proof that Whitman sought to unify the division between body and soul, we need look no further than the infamous section 5 of "Song of Myself". In this section, readers are presented with the erotic coupling of the speaker with his soul, opening the sequence with, "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you," (82). In having the physical self meet the metaphysical in a sexual romp, they become equal. Whitman chooses to have them meet in an erotic liaison in order to confront readers with the intimacy that Western culture teaches us to be

afraid of, eliminating that fear through exposure. We are designed as a unified, complete, and harmonious organism that deserves to be respected so that we may flourish. Whitman unabashedly announces "I contain multitudes" in order to emphasize the beauty of being a multifaceted human ("Song" 1326). Similarly, body positivity advocates that "singularity does not define us", and that we must come to value equally our bodies, souls, and every other dimension of our superficial and spiritual selves (Taylor 104).

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* effectively undermines the brain-washing of body shame imparted by Western culture through its abundant messages of self-acceptance and self-love. Using techniques of body positivity like modeling, subconscious reframing, and providing mantras that remain powerful and unique today, Whitman creates a text that relieves readers of body negativity and helps readers commandeer the bodies they have been deprived of – whether they like it or not. For 21st century readers feeling uninspired by the choices in the self-help genre, or for those looking for a poetical approach to body positivity, might I recommend a perusal of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*? After all, the poet "waits for you", yearning to take you (along with your body) on a journey.

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