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Walt Whitman's "The Eighteenth Presidency!" (1928) narrates the emergence of an American agrarian race. Unpublished during his lifetime but likely completed during the 1856 presidential campaign, this tract projects a future in which "the laboring persons, ploughmen, men with axes, spades, scythes" replace the nation's diseased, dysgenic politicians—"feeble old men," "pimps," and "malignants" who thrive on "the tumors and abscesses of the land."[1] In contrast to these degenerates, the "true people, the millions of white citizens" represent "a different superior race" of "sturdy American freemen," their noble, working-class character reflected in their physical perfection: "healthy-bodied,… bold, muscular, young" (*CP*, 1311, 1314, 1312, 1308, 1309). Poised to overtake the despoiled politicians and city-dwellers and realize Thomas Jefferson's agrarian vision, this race of free laborers and farmers "copiously appears" as "the offspring and proof of These States" (*CP*, 1312). Emphasizing these laborers' physical dominance, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" foretells the rise of the white male working class as a form of population improvement and the path to an agrarian utopian future.

In this fantasy of demographic purification, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" presents a lesser-known early form of American sustainability rhetoric, one that emphasized breeding a fertile, laboring race that cultivates an equally fertile soil (*CP*, 1314). Throughout his life, Whitman struggled to preserve Jeffersonian agrarian ideals of small farming, independent labor, and plentiful land against what he believed posed persistent threats to the nation's future: economic inequality, agricultural blight, slavery, and population degeneracy.[2] Jefferson had envisioned an ever-sustainable America, a vast expanse of "fertile lands" begging to be tilled and populated by independent farmers.[3] But in Whitman's time this vision was far from a reality.

Written following the Compromise of 1850 and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, legislative measures that failed to protect free laborers' interests, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" reflects Whitman's attempt to rescue the nation's deeply endangered agrarian future. The tract is not unlike Jeffersonian strains of contemporary American sustainability rhetoric that advocate returning to small farming, local economies, and stewardship.[4] But rather than rehearse Jefferson's argument that small landowners and farmers are loyal, productive citizens, the essay takes a different rhetorical approach. It converts the seemingly economic ideal of free, independent, agricultural labor into an explicitly physical one of brawn and fertility. In so doing, it begins to reshape Jeffersonian agrarianism into a racial and reproductive discourse—one that envisions the American white working class as a prolific and ascendant race. Rendering these laborers biologically superior, ready to repopulate and invigorate the nation, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" attempts to transcend Whitman's unsustainable present.

Read as a racial progress narrative, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" exemplifies a broader and unexamined trend inflecting Whitman's corpus—a tendency to adapt the

Jeffersonian ideal of small farming to nineteenth-century concepts of selective breeding and racial improvement. In the years preceding the Civil War, Whitman was particularly anxious about the erosion of agrarian values. But as the Free-Soil movement lost traction and slavery threatened to expand, he recognized the limitations of a predominantly political and economic approach to agrarianism. Influenced by American racial science, especially phrenology's popularization in the 1840s, Whitman developed a physiological and hereditarian vocabulary for describing the working class as he prepared his early political writings. This vocabulary permeates antebellum poems such as "A Woman Waits for Me" (1856) and "I Sing the Body Electric" (1855), which celebrate the dignity of average, industrious citizens through physical and seemingly inherited features: their "procreant urge," "strong, firm-fibered bod[ies]," and "massive, clean, bearded, tan-faced, handsome" sons (*CP*, 190, 256). These poems define agrarian laborers based on physique and fertility rather than economic status alone. Their virility safeguards the nation's agrarian future against dysgenic dangers: the "swarms of dough-face[d]," venereal-diseased politicians and "lousy" slave-holders who threaten to "eat the faces off the succeeding generations of common people worse than the most horrible disease" (*CP*, 1309, 1314, 1315). Highlighting these workers' reproductive futurity and physical supremacy, Whitman's antebellum writings depict racial progress and eugenic breeding as the path to a sustainable nation.

This reading recasts Whitman, the long-celebrated poet of diversity, as the architect of a disturbingly eugenic conception of American sustainability—one that aligns the land's fertility with that of a selectively-bred, agrarian population. Scholars have amply documented Whitman's interests in Jeffersonian democracy, racial science, and abundant New World nature, but they have typically treated these interests as separate and unrelated. Over

the past five decades, critics have analyzed the aesthetic, social, political, and economic features of Whitman's democratic thought—his egalitarian poetics, his invention of the American masses, his Jeffersonian principles, and his artisan republicanism—leaving largely unexamined this same tradition's reproductive politics.[5] Meanwhile, studies on physiology and racial science in *Leaves of Grass* (1855–92) often eschew agricultural and Jeffersonian themes, while recent ecopoetic readings prioritize themes of place, regeneration, and the nonhuman world over those of selective breeding and population improvement.[6]

Yet throughout his career, and especially in the decade before the Civil War, Whitman synthesized these seemingly disparate strands of democratic agrarianism, environmental consciousness, and racial and eugenic thought, encouraging average laborers to outbreed those who ostensibly threatened the agrarian dream. Describing future children as "crops" and diseased bodies as polluting "corpses," Whitman's poetry uses agricultural and ecological language to express reproductive anxieties and agendas—to link the population's health and vitality to that of the soil (*CP*, 260, 495). These antebellum texts also depict breeding and racial improvement as the solution to demographic crises and the avenue to agricultural plenty. Depicting feeble, debauched bodies that threaten to contaminate the nation, Whitman's writings imagine sustainability as the capacity to breed a robust laboring race that cultivates a fertile terrain—that "meets the needs" of generations to come.[7]

Whitman's eugenic adaptation of agrarianism casts a shadow on the seemingly sunny lineage between Jefferson's celebration of the small farmer and contemporary discourses promoting organic agriculture, locavorism, and Slow Food.[8] In the past decade, scholars have traced "the greening of agrarianism," as Kimberly K. Smith calls it, showing how writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Wendell Berry drew on Jeffersonian agrarianism as

they rejected industrial agriculture, promoted ecological stewardship, and embraced local consumption.[9] Recently, scholars and popular writers have also greened Jefferson himself, extolling his "eco-cred," composting experiments, and "incipient ecological awareness" as a "founding farmer."[10] Yet Jefferson's foundational role in the history of racial science is notably absent from these discussions that celebrate his agrarian legacy.[11] Whitman's writings, I argue, invite us to rethink this legacy, revealing a lesser-known, inextricable partnership between early eugenic, racial, and agrarian thought. Fusing agricultural and reproductive language, they offer a much more disturbing story about the emergence of sustainability discourse from its Jeffersonian roots.

This story begins with the Free-Soil movement's failure and Whitman's subsequent embrace of phrenological discourse, as section one shows. The second and third sections demonstrate how Whitman extended this discourse to develop an explicitly racial and reproductive agrarianism in his poetry, a perspective that attempts to offer more hope for the nation's future than the failed Free-Soil movement. Depicting women's bodies as beds of soil and praising farmers' physical supremacy, Whitman's poetry promotes eugenics as the path to sustainability. To be sure, Whitman's particularly insidious conception of sustainability is one version of many, and it emphasizes safeguarding the agrarian ideal against seemingly dysgenic threats. But it anticipates other, more menacing versions of eugenic sustainability, such as the early twentieth-century convergence of eugenics, rural uplift, and conservation, and contemporary arguments for US population control, particularly those that treat immigrants and nonwhites as reproductive and environmental threats to demographic stability.[12]

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A THREATENED AGRARIAN FUTURE: EUGENICS TO THE RESCUE

In the decade before *Leaves of Grass*' initial publication, Whitman grappled with the social, economic, and political shortcomings of a nation that was far from agrarian—that was, in his eyes, unsustainable. As journalist and editor for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Whitman supported the Free-Soil movement, which sought to prevent slavery's expansion into recently acquired Mexican territories. Particularly from 1846 to early 1848, his journalism promoted principles of independent landowning and democratic citizenship, reiterating Jefferson's narrative of New World demographic exceptionalism—that the US nation represented the inverse of the overpopulated Old World. Yet national political events prevented Whitman's Jeffersonian vision from coming to fruition. In 1848, Congress voted to allow slavery in the new territories. During these years, Whitman also became engrossed in phrenological writings, reviewing them positively in the *Eagle* as essential works that advanced health and social reform. For Whitman, phrenology's proto-eugenic ideas offered a potential solution to the challenges of a proslavery political landscape and the nation's looming unsustainability. Drawing on these ideas, Whitman's early writings reshape agrarianism from a largely political discourse—one that stressed preserving the free working class' economic status—to a racial and reproductive one.

Whitman's Free-Soil journalism envisions a sustainable utopia in an expanding western US landscape. Written in 1846, nearly two years before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, Whitman's articles frequently celebrate the annexation of Mexican territory as the providential destiny of a burgeoning American agrarian empire.[13] In Whitman's characterization, the Mexican-American

War reflects a preordained progression toward an idyllic farming society: "*Will not the future effect of even this war … hasten the advent of that holy era when all swords shall be beat into plough shares and spears into pruning-hooks?*" (*J*, 150). Here, Whitman's imperialist zeal appears rooted in his commitment to independent agricultural labor and citizenship.

Bolstering this expansionist logic, Whitman's articles during this time often invoke Jefferson's notion of the United States as an agricultural and demographic "safety valve" for Europe.[14] Published in September 1846, an article entitled "Old World Poor" recounts the "vast array of human beings" who "[plunge] into … poverty, and degradation," largely due to the sorry "state of [their country's] agriculture" (*J*, 64). A similar article, printed a few months earlier, attributes this poverty to "the excess of population" and "the grossly partial nature of the laws and the distribution of property."[15] In Europe, Whitman contends, "there is too much mankind and too little earth" (*G*, 16). In contrast, the United States represents a regenerative and fertile home for Europe's impoverished masses, ripe for the development of an agricultural society: "*And then look here at America*…. Millions on millions of uncultivated acres of land … trees and verdure making from year to year their heavy deposits on the remains of the trees and verdure that have decayed before them" (*G*, 17). Such an "interminable" and "boundless" landscape of "unrivalled productiveness and fertility" seems "capable of sustaining nations like the greatest in Europe," feeding and reinvigorating the Old World's "pale children" and "dying women and infants" (*G*, 16–17, 26; *C*, 133). Whitman's journalism thus affirms the Jeffersonian notion of an American agrarian utopia—an abundant terrain that can support an "excess of population."[16]

The institution of slavery, however, overshadowed Whitman's projections of a "safety valve" America, threatening to extend into newly acquired western territories, prevent the

establishment of a utopia of independent laborers, and render the nation unsustainable. Keenly aware of this threat, Whitman wrote a series of passionate editorials supporting the Wilmot Proviso, which promised to prevent the spread of slavery into new US lands, including those acquired from Mexico.[17] In Congress, Free-Soil politicians supported this proviso by invoking slavery's propensity for agricultural decline and hostility to population growth.[18] In an 1847 speech defending his proposal, Congressman David Wilmot himself argued that slavery was economically wasteful, environmentally destructive, and unsustainable: "Slave labor exhausts and makes barren the fields it cultivates…. Crop follows crop, until the fertility of the soil is exhausted, when the old fields are abandoned, new and virgin soil sought out, to be exhausted in the same manner, and in its turn likewise abandoned. Thus, sir, sterility follows its path."[19] Extending this argument, proponents of the Wilmot Proviso advocated for an agrarian utopian future on the grounds that *free* labor fostered sustainable land use.

Whitman, too, associated slavery with barrenness, but he did so by focusing on economic inequality rather than soil exhaustion. For him the Wilmot Proviso did not represent a moral stance against enslaved blacks' continued subjugation. Rather, it sought to prevent the free white laborer's socioeconomic marginalization. Whitman outlined slavery's damaging economic impact in an 1847 article entitled "American Workingmen, versus Slavery": "Slavery is … destructive to the dignity and independence of all who work, and to labor itself. An honest poor mechanic, in a slave State, is put on par with the negro slave mechanic—there being many of the latter, who are hired out by their owners" (*G*, 209).[20] Whitman saw the Wilmot Proviso as a preventive measure against this degradation of free laborers, a fundamentally "Jeffersonian proviso" that would protect the nation's sustainability (*J*, 348).[21]

But as he engaged in Free-Soil politics, Whitman came to understand the limitations of agrarianism as a predominantly political and economic discourse of democratic egalitarianism, agricultural abundance, and landowning rights. When Congress rejected the Wilmot Proviso, Whitman published a series of articles attacking the decision and invoking the memory of Jefferson, "the calm-browed one, and the noblest democrat of them all" (*J*, 349).[22] By early 1850, despite Whitman's and others' efforts, it appeared that Northern Democrats in Congress would negotiate on the slavery issue.[23] Whitman responded to this development with poetry expressing deep political disappointment. His "Song for Certain Congressmen" (1850) condemns politicians for their willingness to compromise, calling them "docile dough faces" that easily succumb to pressure.[24] Published a few months later, a poem entitled "The House of Friends" (1850) describes these same "Doughfaces" as "Crawlers, Lice of Humanity" and "Muck-worms."[25] These poems anticipate *Leaves of Grass* not only because they share its rebellious spirit, as David S. Reynolds notes, but also because they foretell Whitman's dramatically shifting approach to agrarian rhetoric as he recognized its inefficacy on the national political stage.[26]

Whitman's disillusionment with Free-Soil efforts in Congress inspired him to rely increasingly on phrenological discourse to reconceptualize agrarianism through a reproductive lens. In so doing, he began to develop a eugenic notion of sustainability. Based on the ideas that each section of the brain served a particular function and that phrenologists could identify the strength of these functions through skull measurements, phrenology became increasingly popular in the United States during the 1840s. Yet popular phrenology's function was not merely to interpret individual brain structures but also "to improve the human race."[27] Leading US phrenologists and brothers Lorenzo and Orson Fowler declared in an 1849 issue of the *American Phrenological*

Journal that they hoped to "Phrenologize Our Nation" and "Perfect Our Republic"—to "Mould" the "Now Forming Character" of the United States.[28] To Whitman and many others, phrenology offered potential social and physical improvement through "parentage," a combination of heredity and upbringing.[29] And unlike the Free-Soil movement, phrenology appeared unthreatened by the evils of unethical political compromises.

Emerging from a long-running tradition of racial classification, phrenology propagated biologically determinist and hierarchical understandings of racial difference.[30] Yet phrenologists' belief in white European superiority enabled them to be selectively optimistic about the possibility of individual and intergenerational improvement.[31] Referring to the "frontal and coronal portions of the brain" as "the seat of the intellectual" and "moral … organs," the Fowlers contended that "the European race (including their descendants in America) possess a much larger endowment of these organs, and also of their corresponding faculties, than any other portion of the human species. Hence, their intellectual and moral superiority over all other races of men."[32] The pseudoscience became popular in the United States, largely because it offered hope for individual, intergenerational, and, ultimately, racial betterment.[33] Predicting a future of "millennial glory," the Fowlers envisioned "a new order of beings peopl[ing] the earth—a race endowed by nature with all that is noble, great, and good in man, all that is virtuous, lovely, and exquisitely perfect in woman, marred with few defects, enfeebled by few if any diseases, defaced by few moral blemishes, and corrupted by no vices."[34] Premised upon the possibility of white racial improvement, this utopian vision also began to infiltrate Whitman's sustainability rhetoric, as he defended a free laboring race against increasing threats to the agrarian dream.[35]

The Fowlers cultivated this discourse of white racial improvement by emphasizing selective breeding and heredity. Publishing books on marriage, parenting, and sex education, they stressed using one's phrenological profile in spousal selection, which could ensure future generations' physical and moral health.[36] Their work as marriage counselors and sex educators formed part of a broader enterprise of teaching future parents "to endow their children, by nature, with a strong and healthy physical, a high mental, and a powerful intellectual constitution."[37] Deriving his understanding of "parentage" from Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of the inheritability of acquired characteristics, Orson suggested in *Love and Parentage* (1844) that "children *inherit some*, and if some, therefore all, the physical and mental nature and constitution of parents, thus becoming almost their fac similes."[38] Orson's best-known work on parentage, *Hereditary Descent* (1847), promoted an early form of eugenics; it sought "to aid prospective parents in making choice of such partners as shall secure a healthy, talented, virtuous progeny" and stressed that indigent parents should refrain from procreating to avoid "over-population."[39]

Particularly in the latter half of the 1840s, during the heyday of his Free-Soil journalism, Whitman began drawing on the Fowlers' eugenic rhetoric and participating in the phrenological craze, even seeking a reading of his skull at the Fowlers' Brooklyn headquarters. In an 1846 review of phrenologist Johann Gaspar Spurzheim's work, Whitman announced that "phrenology, it must now be confessed by all men who have open eyes, has at last gained a position, and a firm one, among the sciences"—a sentiment he would reiterate in an 1847 article entitled "Something about Physiology and Phrenology" (*J*, 120, 219). In July 1849, a year when Whitman was planning a series of lectures on health and physiology, he asked Lorenzo to analyze his head contours. He discovered from his phrenological report

that he had a "large sized brain" and a "good command of language."[40] With such a positive review, it is perhaps no wonder that phrenology influenced Whitman so much.

This report shaped the presentation, structure, and predominant themes of *Leaves of Grass*' first three editions, where Whitman experimented with combining agrarian and phrenological language. The poet published his phrenological chart in these editions—perhaps as "the proof of a poet" using his unique endowments—and interpreted this data for his readership in a self-review (*CP*, 26). Originally published in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, the review presents Whitman's physical purity and health as evidence of his literary originality: "Of pure American breed,… never once using medicine,… hair like hay after it has been mowed in the field … his physiology corroborating a rugged phrenology … —there you have Walt Whitman, the begetter of a new offspring of literature."[41] Inspired by encouraging phrenological data, this self-review certifies Whitman's bardic status based on physical characteristics: the poet is "pure," "rugged," and, ultimately, poetically fertile. It is perhaps no coincidence that the preface to *Leaves* describes the American poet as having "the ultimate brain," the ideal phrenological profile (*CP*, 9).[42] Most notably, this self-review subtly integrates agrarianism into the phrenological and proto-eugenic discourses that influenced Whitman: the poet's "American breed" not only enjoys a healthy and "rugged" physique but also has hair like mowed "hay," reminiscent of rural labor.

While the Fowlers were particularly influential on these early editions of *Leaves*, the language of physique, fertility, and racial difference inflect Whitman's Free-Soil writings even before he prioritizes his poetry. These early political writings articulate agrarian ideals in racial and reproductive terms. In "American Workingmen," for instance, "free" connotes "white": a "*grand body of white working men, the millions of mechanics, farmers, and operatives of our country*"

(*G*, 208). Moreover, the essay presents a physical ideal that stresses independent labor, production, and cultivation: a "stalwart mass of respectable working men … whose sinews are *their own*" (*G*, 208, 210; emphasis added). This laboring "mass" produces sustenance and raises vigorous future generations, fostering a "*heritage of getting bread by the sweat of the brow, which we must leave to our children*" (*G*, 210). Indeed, "American Workingmen" synthesizes rugged, tanned whiteness (*not* the pale, "dough-face[d]" kind), muscularity, and sustaining, future-oriented labor into a racialized ideal of the Jeffersonian working class: "*the farmers*, the workers of the land—that prolific brood of brown faced fathers and sons who swarm over the free States, and form the bulwark of our republic" (*CP*, 1309; *G*, 211). Drawing on phrenology's proto-eugenic ideas and integrating reproductive, nationalist, and agricultural language—"prolific brood," "our republic, "workers of the land"—the essay idealizes a race of robust and fertile farmers as the backbone of the Free-Soil cause and, ultimately, of American sustainability.[43]

While Whitman's Free-Soil journalism begins to describe free laborers in physical and reproductive terms, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" demonstrates the importance of phrenological concepts such as population improvement to Whitman's version of agrarianism. Prophesying the white working class' political empowerment, the essay seeks a reenergized agrarian vision because the Free-Soil movement has failed. It opens with a classically Jeffersonian claim: "Before the American era, the programme of the classes of a nation read thus, first the king, second the noblemen and gentry, third the great mass of mechanics, farmers … and all laboring persons…. The likes of the class rated third on the old programme were intended to be, and are in fact … the American nation, the people" (*CP*, 1307). "The Eighteenth Presidency!" invigorates this democratic ideal by predicting total demographic renewal: the extinction of

degenerate politicians, slaveowners, and city-dwellers, and the proliferation of an ever-improving white working class. Condemning compromising politicians as "the running sores of the great cities," extolling the free working class as a "different superior race," "The Eighteenth Presidency!" generates a physical basis for the nation's agrarian future (*CP*, 1313, 1314). The essay anticipates a "counteraction of a new race of young men … soon to confront the Presidents, Congresses and parties" and exterminate the "breed[s] upon breed[s]" of enfeebled bureaucrats (*CP*, 1312, 1309). Adapting popular phrenological notions of white superiority and intergenerational improvement, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" celebrates a "heroic" race of "sturdy American freemen … from thrifty farms," whose fecundity protects the nation against "serpentine" types (*CP*, 1308, 1312, 1314). In this regard, the essay imaginatively transcends the "dough-face[d]" politics of Whitman's time to restore the agrarian dream (*CP*, 1309). In "The Eighteenth Presidency!," this dream is biological, preordained, and no politician can prevent it.

Whitman's Free-Soil journalism and "The Eighteenth Presidency!" begin to transform the agrarian ideal; what once seemed like an exclusively economic ideal of free, independent, and largely agricultural labor becomes a physical one of brawn and fertility. As his writings draw on proto-eugenic principles, they identify the democratic citizen through biological and seemingly inherited features. Using assessments of physical vigor and health that echo Whitman's interpretation of his own phrenological report, they certify the predestined dominance of a white working class. Just as the Fowlers championed judicious spousal selection as a mode of improving the race, so too does "The Eighteenth Presidency!" promote replacing sickly, "pimpled" politicians and businessmen with a hearty, muscular, democratic population (*CP*, 1313). Frustrated by the Free-Soil movement's political struggles and enthusiastic about

phrenology, Whitman began to imagine an innately fecund, free laboring class that politicians could not thwart with compromise. At a time when the nation seemed far from sustainable, far from its Jeffersonian ideals of small farming and free labor, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" imaginatively reempowers the white working class and inaugurates an era of eugenic optimism infusing Whitman's writing.

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BEDS OF SOIL AND BREEDING GROUNDS

Whitman's early political writings prefigure the explicitly eugenic fantasies of breeding an agrarian race that surface in *Leaves of Grass*. Yet in Whitman's Free-Soil journalism, and in "The Eighteenth Presidency!" more specifically, the process of propagating these "fierce and turbulent races" remains unclear (*CP*, 1349). Likely written around the same time, "This Compost" (1856) functions as an agricultural companion piece to "The Eighteenth Presidency!," depicting this lack of reproductive clarity as ecologically disturbing because it emphasizes the soil's mysterious absorption of sickly corpses. First published in *Leaves*' second edition, "A Woman Waits for Me" clarifies this reproductive process. Describing eugenic breeding, the speaker selects a rugged rural female partner for conceiving vigorous laborers. Presenting eugenics as a national sustainability project, a cultivation of productive citizens, "A Woman Waits" depicts procreative sex as the transmission of agrarian traits that encourage agricultural and population improvement. Indeed, these poems together grapple with the question of *how* to achieve sustainability—how to breed a fertile population that can cultivate an equally fertile soil.

As it focuses on working-class men, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" anticipates a reproductive future without describing reproduction itself.[44] At most, the essay gestures toward an intergenerational improvement that purifies the

nation of decaying politicians: "A pretty time for two dead corpses to go walking up and down the earth, to guide by feebleness and ashes a proud, young, friendly, fresh heroic nation of thirty millions of live and electric men!" (*CP*, 1349). Describing politicians as "corpses" that haunt the "fresh" generation, this passage implicitly promotes population improvement. Yet it elides the process that supposedly proliferates this vigorous race, leaving a critical gap in its regeneration narrative. "This Compost" elaborates on this narrative in markedly ecological terms, imagining decaying, corrupt "corpses" as the breeding ground for new life.

Originally entitled "Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of Wheat," "This Compost" depicts a process of agricultural renewal that begins with contaminated soil—one that, especially when read alongside "The Eighteenth Presidency!," doubles as a fantasy of reproductive improvement. The poem opens by expressing a "proto-toxic consciousness," as Paul Outka calls it—with a speaker shocked by corpses infecting the earth: "O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?," the speaker asks, referring to the "distemper'd corpses" embedded within it (*CP*, 495).[45] Harboring material and moral impurities, the carcasses of "drunkards and gluttons of so many generations" threaten to transform the food supply into "foul liquid and meat" (*CP*, 495). The speaker cultivates the land with "plough" and "space," observing the heroic emergence of healthy crops from toxic soil:

> The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould
> in the garden,
> The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward.
> (*CP*, 495–96)[46]

Contrasting these regenerating crops with the polluted soil, "This Compost" presents an agricultural allegory of "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in which crops signify laborers

and corpses signify degenerate politicians' bodies. The conversion of "endless successions of diseas'd corpses" into "prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops" reflects the purifying proliferation of "healthy-bodied" workers (*CP*, 496–97, 1332). Triumphantly "burst[ing]" and "pierc[ing] upward," the crops enact what "The Eighteenth Presidency!" prophesies: a burgeoning working class that infuses healthy democracy into a poisoned nation, cleansing it of compromise, greed, and excess (*CP*, 495–96). Taken together, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" and "This Compost" articulate the nation's demographic regeneration in agricultural terms—a superior "[crop]" emerging from a foul soil.[47]

Ultimately, these images of contaminated soil and rejuvenated crops prove more unsettling than hopeful, suggesting that population improvement might require a more controlled reproductive process. Even as it celebrates an agricultural "resurrection," "This Compost" betrays an anxiety regarding the polluted source of supposedly pure and healthy sustenance. This anxiety accompanies what ecocritics have described as the speaker's heightened environmental awareness: a "dramatic recognition of difference," a "respect [for] nature's mystery," a "confront[ation]" of its "otherness."[48] Amid this recognition of the earth's unknowability, the speaker fixates on the crops' impure origins, rendering their emergence as troubling as it is triumphant. In the penultimate stanza, even as the speaker confirms "that all is clean forever and ever," he repeatedly raises the possibility of "infectious" air, oceanic "fevers," and "poison[ed]" fruits—of "catching a disease" from a "spear of grass" (*CP*, 496). Naming these possibilities, the speaker makes conscious the possible contaminants lurking in the environment, questioning the crops' purity and imagining a milieu not unlike the corpse-ridden one in "The Eighteenth Presidency!" By the final stanza, the speaker is "terrified at the Earth"—not just because it "grows such sweet things out of such corruptions" but also because he cannot

unthink their source (*CP*, 496). Since the speaker dwells so extensively on the crops' corrupted origins, they never become cleansed in "This Compost." Instead, they indicate the despoiled lineage of a hearty working class.

Focused on the messy ecological images of corpses, soil, and renewal, "This Compost" and "The Eighteenth Presidency!" are reproductively unsettling because they lack a direct, conscious, sexual selection process. "A Woman Waits" begins to solve this problem, depicting the speaker's sexual experience as a nation-building process of propagating American laborers. The speaker prefaces the sexual act by choosing an appropriate female partner, the passive recipient of his "pent-up rivers" (*CP*, 260). As "the robust husband," he seeks "worthy" women waiting for "the moisture of the right man":

> They are tann'd in the face by shining suns and
> blowing winds,
> Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and
> strength,
> ……
> they are
> calm, clear, well-possess'd of themselves.
> (*CP*, 258–59)[49]

The speaker assesses sexual fitness based on rural vigor and working-class fortitude, which characterize "women fit for conception" throughout *Leaves* (*CP*, 232).[50] A meticulously selected repository for the speaker's sperm, this female body guarantees that reproductive origins are uncorrupted. "A Woman Waits" thus enacts a national eugenic fantasy that ensures pure origins, well-selected sperm, and a "worthy" womb.

"Unfolded out of the Folds" (1856) elaborates the role of the female body in breeding ideal laboring citizens. Using phrenological and physiological language, the poem

describes the female body as the reproductive origin of ever-improving men:

> Unfolded only out of the superbest woman of the earth is to come the superbest man of the earth,
> .....
> Unfolded only out of the perfect body of a woman can a man be form'd of perfect body,
> .....
> Unfolded by brawny embraces from the well-muscled woman I love, only thence come the brawny embraces of the man,
> Unfolded out of the folds of the woman's brain come all the folds of the man's brain, duly obedient[.]
>
> (*CP*, 515–16)

Like "A Woman Waits," the poem depicts the female body as a mere receptacle, as the speaker's use of passive voice suggests (*CP*, 516). Yet the poem also idealizes these "perfect" female bodies as instruments of phrenological formation and direct, hereditary transmission, their "superbest" vaginal folds delivering "the superbest man of the earth," their brain "folds" delivering "the folds of the man's brain." Insofar as phrenology claims that the brain's folds indicate the strength of one's moral and intellectual character, the poem celebrates reproduction as a controllable, direct process, its outcome improving through the fertilization of "superbest" female bodies. Using vocabulary similar to Whitman's political writings, where the "*grand body of white workingmen*" becomes a racial ideal, "Unfolded" and "A Woman Waits" describe the "perfect" female breeder as "well-muscled," "brawny," and "tann'd in the face" (*G*, 208; *CP*, 515, 516, 259). Moreover, both poems assess the female body's reproductive capacity based on phrenological composition, a well-molded "brain in its folds inside the skull frame" (*CP*, 258). Elucidated in "Unfolded,"

this treatment of the female body in "A Woman Waits" integrates eugenic breeding into an otherwise miraculous narrative of racial improvement.

Indeed, "A Woman Waits" presents a triumphant, singular vision of eugenic sustainability. The poem intermingles the language of sperm and sex with that of agricultural renewal, merging themes of reproductive futurism and earthly sustenance so that they appear inextricably intertwined:

> In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
> On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved
> of me and America,
> .....
> The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes
> in their turn,
> I shall demand perfect men and women out
> of my love-spendings,
> I shall expect them to interpenetrate with
> others, as I and you interpenetrate now,
> I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers
> of them, as I count on the fruits of the gushing
> showers I give now,
> I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life,
> death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.
> (*CP*, 260)

As these final lines show, human and agricultural fertility become synonymous in the poem. The speaker describes himself as a farmer and horticulturalist, a planter of carefully selected seeds, a "graft[er]" of his "best-beloved" spermatic matter. He characterizes his female partner as a bed of soil (not to be confused with the putrid kind in "This Compost").[51] Drawing on the theory that semen contains spermatic, preformed homunculi, the speaker conflates his "love-spendings" with the seeds of future citizens: "I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States" (*CP*, 260, 259).[52]

The speaker also gestures toward the "fruits" of the next generation's labor, the agricultural improvement that these selectively "plant[ed]" offspring will beget. Just as the speaker "grow[s]" "crops" of children, so too will those children grow literal "crops" that feed a productive population. This process swells with reproductive futurity: "a thousand onward years" in which "babes … beget babes in their turn," ensuring the speaker's "immortality" through his equally fertile "fruits" and "crops." Having chosen an athletic, salubrious, yet passive mate, the speaker in "A Woman Waits" is the hero in his own nation-building process: his preformed "sons and daughters" will continue to carry out the nation's Jeffersonian destiny of agricultural plenty. In this context, national sustainability signifies the cultivation of farmers that continue to feed and breed a "perfect" American population (*CP*, 260). Despite the seemingly impending unsustainability of Whitman's time—brought on by slavery, agricultural decline, and a generally corrupt, degenerating population—sustainability in this poem appears biologically preordained and invincible. Selective breeding, it seems, will ensure a utopian agrarian future.

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"THE COMMON FARMER" AS ETHNOLOGICAL TYPE

While "A Woman Waits" depicts the cultivation of agrarian bodies, "I Sing the Body Electric" represents these bodies in the linked images of the "common farmer" and the enslaved laborer on the auction block (*CP*, 252). Here the nation's sustainability relies not just on the *process* of eugenic breeding but also its products. As the reproductive sequel to "A Woman Waits," the poem redefines the agrarian subject based on physique and fertility rather than property ownership or free and independent status; enslaved and free laborers are not economic competitors but rather physical

equals. Displaying a marked shift in agrarian rhetoric, the poem reflects Whitman's preoccupation during these years with developing a physically robust race of laborers—one that, in his eyes, could protect the nation against looming dysgenic threats to its sustainability.

"I Sing the Body Electric" depicts "a common farmer" as the ideal product of agrarian breeding: an ethnological type, or what Whitman himself might call a "[healthy] specimen of country life" (*CP*, 963).[53]

> I knew a man, a common farmer, the father of
> five sons,
> And in them the fathers of sons, and in them the
> fathers of sons.
> This man was of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty
> of person,
> The shape of his head, the pale yellow and white
> of his hair…,
> ……
> He was six feet tall, he was over eighty years old,
> his sons were massive, clean, bearded, tan-
> faced, handsome,
> ……
> He drank water only, the blood show'd like scarlet
> through the clear-brown skin of his face,
> ……
> When he went with his five sons and many grand-
> sons to hunt or fish, you would pick him out
> as the most beautiful and vigorous of the gang[.]
> (*CP*, 252)

This description of "the common farmer" fundamentally recasts what it means to be agrarian. The language of rural "vigor," multigenerational fertility, and "clear-brown skin" pervade this passage, recalling Whitman's Free-Soil journalism and his idealization of "*farmers*" as a "prolific brood of brown faced fathers and sons" (*G*, 211). The phrase

"the shape of his head" functions as a racial index, evoking the phrenological correlation between head shape, skull shape, and race, as well as moral and intellectual fortitude. In lines that suggest purity, we learn that the farmer has a "complexion showing the best blood," his body invigorated and cleansed by his consumption of "water only" (*CP*, 963). Given Orson Fowler's emphasis on water as "essential to life" and Whitman's own recommendation that men drink "simple cool water," this description implies that, although this farmer may be old, his country-leathered face exudes vitality ("MH," 249).[54] Through this portrait, the "common farmer" transforms into a physiological and phrenological paradigm—one defined not by economic status or property ownership but rather by fertility and healthy physique.

A product of agrarian breeding, outdoor exercise, and a generally healthy lifestyle, the common farmer demonstrates the benefits of "Manly Health and Training" (1858)—the subject of Whitman's lesser-known self-help series, pseudonymously published in the *New York Atlas*. Discovered by Zachary Turpin and republished in 2016, these columns confirm the extent to which phrenology and eugenics shaped Whitman's thinking, particularly in the decade before the Civil War.[55] While the essays discuss climatological as well as hereditary factors, they prioritize training—regular exercise, a wholesome diet, and sexual temperance—as the primary path to physical perfection and, by extension, to strong moral character. Like "The Eighteenth Presidency!" and "A Woman Waits for Me," "Manly Health" promotes "the development of a *superb race of men*, large-bodied, clean-blooded, and with all the attributes of the best material humanity" ("MH," 196). But although this text praises the "active out-door occupations" of "carpenters, masons, farmers, [and] laborers" as particularly conducive to this training, it makes clear that even city-dwellers, clerks, and politicians can, with enough practice, become "healthy specimens" ("MH," 208, 300).[56]

Despite this focus on training, "Manly Health" exhibits the same anxiety about dysgenic threats that characterizes "The Eighteenth Presidency!"; men like the common farmer, with their "brawny muscles" and "virile power," work to extinguish these threats and ensure national sustainability ("MH," 196, 277). Lamenting what he observes as widespread "physical inferiority" caused by "feeble maternity and paternity" and sexual excess, Whitman tells American men that "so long as you … allow yourself to be a victim to all these pestiferous little gratifications that are offered to you in the city, so long will you present a marked contrast to the noble physique of the lumberman and hunter" ("MH," 209, 210, 252, 289). Wherever these threats to the laboring population's health and fertility emerge in Whitman's writing, the subject of "Breeding Superb Men" is not far behind, even in a text on training: "Much of a man's … body and mind … depends on causes that exist and operate, in full activity, before his birth" ("MH," 227). Indeed, as a corrective to the population's "*tainted blood*" and "*enfeebled offspring*," "Manly Health" promotes "*the sublime science of breeding a nation of … clean-fleshed men*" ("MH," 279, 275). It thus forms part of Whitman's antebellum sustainability rhetoric, working to ensure that the laboring population "will not die out," as Turpin puts it.[57] The "common farmer," moreover, epitomizes this population's physical and procreative features (*CP*, 252).

At first glance, this particularly physical depiction of the "common farmer" has an ostensibly democratizing effect in "I Sing the Body Electric." In section 7, the speaker describes a "man's body at auction," implicitly linking the enslaved laborer to the free and independent farmer through their shared physiological, phrenological, and reproductive features. Just as the farmer embodies phrenological excellence—"the shape of his head" reflecting "the richness and breadth of his manners"—so too does the enslaved man's "head" contain an "all-baffling brain" (*CP*, 252, 255).

Just as the farmer signifies an infinite reproductive futurity as "the father of five sons, / And in them the fathers of sons," so too does the enslaved man signify "the start of populous states and rich republics, /… countless immortal lives," and "offspring through the centuries" (*CP*, 252, 256). Similarly, section 8 describes the "woman's body at auction" as "the teeming mother of mothers" (*CP*, 256). This comparison seems like a democratizing gesture that highlights the "sacred" character of both laboring bodies and the enslaved peoples' "same red-running blood": "Do you think," the speaker asks, that "water runs and vegetation sprouts, / For you only, and not for him or her?" (*CP*, 256, 255). Invoking the "uniform hieroglyphic" of grass from "Song of Myself" (1855), the undifferentiating entity that "grow[s] among black folks as among white," the speaker celebrates free and enslaved laborers, united in phrenology and fertility (*CP*, 193).[58]

However, as the description of the "man's body at auction" suggests, the speaker's emphasis on physique and fertility has economic undertones that complicate his democratizing gestures (*CP*, 255). Though the enslaved laborer shares the same physique as the farmer, the speaker details his figure in a market inventory style that highlights his unfree status; his "limbs" are "stript" for prospective buyers, revealing profitable features: "flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, good-sized arms and legs" (*CP*, 255, 256). Here, the auction block's dehumanizing quality undercuts the speaker's claims for equality.[59] The slave's status as salable commodity, moreover, reveals that the poem's emphasis on brawn and fertility functions as an assessment of economic value: the speaker evaluates both free and enslaved laborer based on their abilities to perform agricultural labor, reproduce more laborers, and thereby contribute to the ongoing project of national sustainability. Rather than equalize the independent farmer and the enslaved man, the speaker

assesses their agricultural and reproductive productivity using similar criteria but in jarringly inequitable contexts.

"I Sing the Body Electric" revises Whitman's argument from his Free-Soil writings. In his journalism, Whitman emphasized the economic difference between the free and enslaved laborer, fearing that the white laborer would become marginalized within a slave-based economy. Prioritizing physical and reproductive characteristics, this poem diverges from Free-Soil rhetoric by highlighting the commonalities between independent farmer and enslaved laborer. Yet this redefined agrarianism neither fully humanizes nor elevates the enslaved subject, as the auction-block highlights the salable status of the "man's body" (*CP*, 255). Instead, this description serves an important rhetorical function in Whitman's writing, distinguishing this markedly eugenic agrarianism from its earlier, Free-Soil version, which pitted enslaved and free laborer against one another. While these physiological and phrenological descriptions still manifest economic and racial difference, "I Sing the Body Electric" exhibits a larger trend across Whitman's antebellum writings: to invent a new agrarianism that persists despite the Free-Soil movement's failure. In these writings, American sustainability begins to appear much more plausible, if not *guaranteed*, because it relies on controlled breeding and physical perfectibility rather than corrupt politics.

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After Emancipation, Whitman seemed less worried about the nation's sustainability. He shifted his focus from the conscious work of selective breeding to the seeming certitude of evolution to support his physiological version of agrarianism. And unlike the enslaved laborer of "I Sing the Body Electric," freed blacks were not included, even for rhetorical purposes, in this "*superber race*" of laborers (*CP*, 352).[60] Like US scientists in the years following the

Civil War, Whitman was influenced by Herbert Spencer's notion of "survival of the fittest" and Frances Galton's theory of the supremacy of a master race (concepts that likely confirmed the phrenology-based racial hierarchies he had studied before the war).[61] With slavery abolished and evolutionary theories of racial progress circulating, America's agrarian future appeared far less threatened than it did in the decade before the Civil War, at least according to Whitman's writings. In fact, in postbellum poems such as "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" (1865) and "Song of the Redwood-Tree" (1874), the inevitability of racial progress *guarantees* the laboring population's fertility and, by extension, the land's abundance. These poems rely on evolutionary certainty to imaginatively expunge the "swarms" of lesser races from Whitman's vision of a robust, agrarian race (*CP*, 373).[62] Indeed, after the war Whitman seemed much less focused on *how* to breed and develop a "vigorous" race of "*white working men*"; in his postbellum writings, self-assured predictions of nonwhite extinction seem to eclipse the anxious eugenic sustainability rhetoric that characterizes his antebellum writings (*G*, 208; MH, 190).[63]

But even in Whitman's imagination, racial-extinction theory does not entirely secure the nation's agrarian future. In fact, his eugenic sustainability rhetoric rears its head in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), an essay that confronts imagined postbellum threats to the nation's demographic stability. Urging readers to examine the nation "like a physician diagnosing some deep disease," *Democratic Vistas* echoes "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in its critiques of the nation's biological and political shortcomings, some of which persist despite Emancipation (*CP*, 937). Depicting New York City's population gruesomely, the essay laments the broader prevalence of "cities, crowded with petty grotesques" (*CP*, 939). These cities represent a "dry and flat Sahara," their inhabitants displaying various deformities, sexual excess,

racial darkness, and impurity: "malformations," "puny" youth, "an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms … muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceas'd" (*CP*, 939). As a cure, Whitman seeks to empower the "millions of sturdy farmers and mechanics" and promotes "a more universal ownership of property, general homesteads, general comfort—a vast intertwining reticulation of wealth" (*CP*, 953, 950). But to realize this Jeffersonian vision and finally overcome "feudalism," the "average" population must follow a eugenic program (*CP*, 930, 954).

As an alternative to these degenerate forms that imperil the nation's sustainability, *Democratic Vistas* presents "a democratic ethnology of the future," describing an ideal "specimen of the species," "a clear-blooded, strong-fibred physique;… well-begotten…, fresh, ardent…, the complexion showing the best blood" (*CP*, 963). To produce this "specimen," Whitman argues, American citizens must "prepare the canvas beforehand": "Parentage must consider itself in advance. (Will the time hasten when fatherhood and motherhood shall become a science—and the noblest science?)" (*CP*, 963). Evoking the phrenological rhetoric stressing spousal selection, *Democratic Vistas* advocates the "rais[ing] up and supply[ing] [of] … a copious race of superb American men and women" (*CP*, 961). Like "A Woman Waits," moreover, the text employs agricultural metaphors to envision "crops of fine youths," "the traits of America … grafted on newer, hardier, purely native stock" (*CP*, 939, 952). The path to realizing Jefferson's agrarian vision, it seems, is ultimately eugenic and paved with ideologies of white racial improvement.

Although Whitman became increasingly focused on reproduction, physiology, and racial science throughout his career, he never lost sight of this agrarian dream, even as he grew old. Interestingly, "Notes Left Over" (1882), a

collection of Whitman's prose, concludes with a distinctly Jeffersonian prophecy:

> The final culmination of this vast and varied Republic will be the … establishment of millions of comfortable city homesteads and moderate-sized-farms, healthy and independent, single separate ownership, fee simple, life in them complete but cheap, within reach of all…. There is a subtle something in the common earth, crops, cattle, air, trees … that forms the only purifying and perennial element for individuals and for society. I must confess I want to see the agricultural occupation of America at first hand permanently broaden'd. Its gains are the only ones on which God seems to smile. (*CP*, 1074)

Across his writings, Whitman sought to "contain multitudes"—to celebrate a range of peoples and contexts in his writings (*CP*, 87). But ultimately, as this passage suggests, his vision of the nation's future depended most crucially on small farming and the environmental stewardship and economic egalitarianism that attend it. Moreover, the close of Whitman's late-career autobiographical work, *Specimen Days* (1882), affirms that rural simplicity is crucial for sustaining the nation's "grand races" of laborers: "American Democracy … must either be fibred, vitalized, by regular contact with … farm-scenes … or it will certainly dwindle and pale" (*CP*, 925–26). Attempting to maintain that contact, particularly when this Jeffersonian "Democracy" seemed threatened, Whitman's writing entangles agricultural and reproductive language, infusing eugenic and racial thought into agrarian discourse.

In its nostalgia for an innocent, Jeffersonian past, today's neo-agrarian sustainability discourse typically elides this

entanglement. But Whitman's writings examined here reveal a knot in the all-too-neat line from early American agrarianism to contemporary sustainability discourses—particularly those that lament how industrial society threatens Jefferson's agrarian dream. For Whitman, in the decade before the Civil War, the agrarian dream also appeared in jeopardy: slavery threatened to expand into western territories, disempowering free white laborers, perpetuating inequality, and exhausting the soil's fertility. Whitman responded by developing his own nineteenth-century sustainability rhetoric. As he attempted to imaginatively rescue the agrarian dream from various agricultural and reproductive threats, he found the discourses of racial science and eugenics appealing. For him, controlled breeding safeguarded this dream and thus the nation's agricultural and demographic sustainability. Moreover, while Whitman's eugenic sustainability rhetoric is unique, it reveals how the seemingly separate discourses of agrarianism, reproduction, and racial science can furtively fuse and overlap in powerful, dangerous, and violent ways.[64] And in our current moment of neo-agrarian revival, as scholars and popular writers increasingly look to Jefferson's proud eco-legacy, Whitman's rhetoric demands that we be mindful about how racial and reproductive politics inform the sustainability solutions we propose.

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NOTES

1. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1310, 1307, 1313; hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP.* For a reading of "The Eighteenth Century!" as a political jeremiad, see Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 129–32.
2. In a 1785 letter to John Jay, Jefferson explained his agrarian philosophy by linking farming and citizenship: "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country … by the most lasting bonds." Thomas Jefferson to Jay, Paris, August 23, 1785, in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 818.
3. In an 1804 letter to Jean Baptiste Say, Jefferson declared that, unlike the overpopulated Old World, the United States was blessed with an "immense extent of uncultivated and fertile lands," which "enables every one who will labor, to marry young, and to raise a family of any size." Jefferson to Say, Washington, February 1, 1804, in Jefferson, *Writings*, 1144.
4. See for instance Gary Paul Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods* (New York: Norton, 2002), 70; Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); and Edwin C. Hagenstein, Sara M. Gregg, and Brian Donahue, eds., *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Culture, and the Land* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011). In his history of sustainability, Jeremy Caradonna does well to highlight how sustainability rhetoric, in its many manifestations, is a reaction to a *threat* as well as an acknowledgment of unsustainable economic and ecological practices. Caradonna, *Sustainability: A History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 1–20.
5. Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973); Donald E. Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1987); Erkkila, *Whitman the*

Political Poet; and Andrew Lawson, *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006).

6. On racial science, physiology, and the body, see Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980); M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body: Sexuality, Politics, and the Text* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989); Dana Phillips, "Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought and Whitman's 'Democratic Ethnology of the Future,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (December 1994): 313; David Reynolds, "Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Views of Gender and Sexuality," in *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1994), 38–45; and Carolyn Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature, 1833–1879* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002). For recent ecocritical studies, see M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2004); Paul Outka, "(De)composing Whitman," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature & Environment* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 41–60; George B. Handley, *New World Poetics: Nature and the Adamic Imagination of Whitman, Neruda, and Walcott* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2007); and Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2014).
7. In this last phrase, I am referencing the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability. Sustainability became widely recognized as a global concept after this UN commission defined it as development that "meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 8.
8. In the final lines of *American Georgics*, an anthology of writings extending from J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) to the contemporary Slow Food movement, the editors invoke Thomas Jefferson as the judge and standard-bearer of contemporary sustainable farming cultures. Hagenstein, Gregg, and Donahue, *American Georgics*, 376. Moreover, prominent

locavore memoirs (as Allison Carruth calls them) tend to draw an all-too-neat line from Jefferson himself—the supposed origin point of agrarian wisdom—to contemporary efforts to promote sustainable agriculture in the United States. Often, the locavore's desire to return to an agrarian past is coupled with the implication that, unfortunately, Americans have failed to fulfill Jefferson's dream. See Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat*, 70; and Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, 150. For a discussion of the locavore memoir as a genre, see Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013). See also Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 204.

9. See Kimberly K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2003); Hagenstein, Gregg, and Donahue, *American Georgics*; and Mark Sturges, "Aesthetic Extracts: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Maple Culture," *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 63, no. 3 (2017): 431–78.
10. Noah Schlager, "Which Presidents Have Eco-Cred?," *Sierra Magazine*, January/February 2016, accessed March 17, 2016, https://www.sierraclub.org; and Mark Sturges, "Founding Farmers: Jefferson, Washington, and the Rhetoric of Agricultural Reform," *Early American Literature* 50, no. 3 (2015): 681, 682. See also Paul B. Thompson, *The Agrarian Vision: Sustainability and Environmental Ethics* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2010), 3; and Andrea Wulf, *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 10–11. For a discussion of Jefferson's composting experiments, see Josh Trought, *The Community-Scale Permaculture Farm: The D Acres Model for Creating and Managing an Ecologically Designed Educational Center* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 2015), 242.
11. For discussions of Jefferson's foundational role in the history of US racial science, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981); Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002);

Melissa N. Stein, *Measuring Manhood: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015); and Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York UP, 2017).

12. For a discussion of the intersection of eugenic, rural uplift, and conservationist rhetoric, see Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890–1938* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007), 110–30. For a history of Malthusian environmentalism and its convergence with discourses of eugenics and immigration restriction, see Thomas Robertson, *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012). On US nativist environmentalism, see Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Naguib Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden* (New York: New York UP, 2011); and John Hultgren, *Border Walls Gone Green: Nature and Anti-Immigrant Politics in America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015).
13. For Whitman, the US acquisition of Mexican land facilitated the realization of an ideal democracy of physically strong, productive citizens. For instance, a December 1846 article declares that "radical, true, far-scoped, and thorough-going Democracy may expect, (and such expecting will be realized,) great things from the West!"—associating democracy with those "hardy denizens of those regions." Walt Whitman, *The Journalism*, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia, vol. 2, *1846–1848* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 157–58; hereafter cited parenthetically as *J*.
14. In his 1804 letter to Say, Jefferson wrote that the anticipated "surplus" of food in the United States could "go to nourish the now perishing births of Europe." Jefferson, *Writings*, 1144.
15. Walt Whitman, *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920), 1:15–16; hereafter cited parenthetically as *G*.
16. For a discussion of this specifically *demographic* agrarian ideal, see Abby L. Goode, "No 'Rural Bowl of Milk': Demographic Agrarianism and Unsustainability in *Pierre*," *Studies in American Fiction* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 29, 32.

17. Submitted by Congressman David Wilmot in August of 1846, the Wilmot Proviso proposed "as an express and fundamental condition to the acquisition of any territory" that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of said territory." Cong. Globe, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. 1217 (1846), quoted in Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1967), 18. Four months later, Whitman published a short piece in the *Eagle* calling on Democrats to "plant themselves … fixedly and without compromise, on the requirement that *Slavery be prohibited … forever*" in the recently annexed territories. Whitman, *Gathering of the Forces*, 194.
18. See Adam Wesley Dean, *An Agrarian Republic: Farming, Antislavery Politics, and Nature Parks in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2015), 27, 35.
19. "Restriction of Slavery. Speech of Mr. D. Wilmot […]," Cong. Globe, 29th Cong., 2nd Sess. app. 318 (1847), available online at https://books.google.com.
20. As congressional debates surged, Whitman also highlighted slavery's economic toxicity in January 1847 by publishing a poem in the *Eagle* entitled "There Must Be Something Wrong." Lamenting the "barrenness and drought" of "poor men's tables" and demanding that "the law give equal right / To wealthy and to poor," the poem condemns the conditions of a slave-based society. Whitman, "There Must Be Something Wrong," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 7, 1847, 1, quoted in Jerome Loving, "The Political Roots of *Leaves of Grass*," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 110–11.
21. In fact, in his writings from March and April 1847, Whitman implied that Jefferson was a Free-Soiler at heart—"anxious that the time should arrive when the words which he put forth in the Declaration of Independence, 'that all men are born free and equal,' should be as true in fact as self-evident in theory." Whitman, *Gathering of the Forces*, 199–201.
22. Disheartened by the *Eagle*'s loyalty to the Democrats, who seemed unable to maintain a strong antislavery stance in Congress,

Whitman founded a Free-Soil paper called the *Brooklyn Freeman* in 1848. Later that year, a fire destroyed the *Freeman* offices and Zachary Taylor defeated presidential Free-Soil candidate Martin Van Buren. See Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 51; and Lawson, *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle*, 45–46.

23. By this time Henry Clay had introduced a series of compromises in Congress, including a stricter fugitive slave law. For more details on Whitman's disappointment with the Compromise of 1850, see Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 53; and Reynolds, "Walt Whitman, 1819–1892: A Brief Biography," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, 23.
24. Walt Whitman, *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York UP, 1963), 44–45.
25. Whitman, *Early Poems and the Fiction*, 36–37.
26. See Reynolds, "Walt Whitman, 1819–1892: A Brief Biography," 24.
27. L. N. Fowler, *Marriage: Its Histories and Ceremonies* […] (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1848), 193, quoted in Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1972), 42.
28. "The American Phrenological Journal for 1849," *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* 11, no. 1 (1849): 12, quoted in Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 35.
29. Whitman was a regular reader of this journal in the 1850s and frequently visited the Fowlers' phrenological museum in the late 1840s. For more information on this time, see Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of "Leaves of Grass"* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1974), 157–58. Among those who had their skulls read at Clinton Hall, where the Fowlers worked, were Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, Horace Greeley, Lydia Sigourney, Brigham Young, Hiram Powers, Lydia Maria Child, Edwin Forrest, and Mark Twain. See David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*: *A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 247.
30. For a more detailed account of phrenology's place in the history of racial thought, see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 47, 55–59. Horsman also explains here how Scotsman and Anglo-Saxonist

George Combe brought phrenology to the United States and integrated it into emerging discourses of scientific racism.

31. As Horsman observes, phrenologists assumed that whites were capable of indefinite improvement and that nonwhites were "irredeemably limited by the deficiencies of their original cerebral organization." Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 143. For an account of phrenological assessments of different races and their respective characteristics and limitations, see 144–45.
32. O. S. Fowler and L. N. Fowler, *Phrenology Proved, Illustrated, and Applied* […] (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1850), 26.
33. Phrenologists believed that children in particular could develop certain brain faculties with practice. As Aspiz highlights, phrenologists drew on Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's law of exercise: the more a phrenological organ is used, the stronger and larger it becomes. See Aspiz, *Body Beautiful*, 110; and Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 57.
34. O. S. Fowler, *Hereditary Descent: Its Laws and Facts Applied to Human Improvement* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1853), 281.
35. Nathaniel Mackey points out that phrenology "failed to offer its beneficence and promise of improvement to those who were not white; its will to reform didn't extend to reforming notions of racial determinism or the social relations upheld by such notions." Mackey, "Phrenological Whitman," *Conjunctions*, no. 29 (Fall 1997), accessed May 29, 2018, http://www.conjunctions.com. However, phrenology's focus on improvement lent itself to antislavery adaptations. For a discussion of how black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass redeployed phrenological discourse, see Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, 124–26.
36. The Fowlers also printed matrimonial advertisements in the *American Phrenological Journal*, and some of their customers distributed their phrenological readings in hopes of finding an appropriate spouse. See Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 45–46.
37. O. S. Fowler, *Love and Parentage* […], 40th ed. (New York: Wells, 1869), v.
38. Fowler, *Love and Parentage*, 24.
39. Fowler, *Hereditary Descent*, 5, 239.

40. Since Orson had noted the longevity of Whitman's ancestors in *Hereditary Descent*, Whitman may have been curious to learn more from the Fowlers about his genealogy. Sure enough, Whitman discovered from his report that he had "a good constitution and power to live to a good old age." The report, moreover, anticipated Whitman's poetic persona, describing him as a "good physiognomist," one of "considerable imagination," with "little regard for creeds and ceremonies." Clarence Gohdes and Rollo G. Silver, eds., *Faint Clews and Indirections: Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family* (Durham, Duke UP, 1949), quoted in Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 102, 104.
41. Walt Whitman, "A Brooklyn Boy," review of *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Daily Times*, September 29, 1855, 1, quoted in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: Fowler & Wells, 1856), 361–62.
42. The early editions of *Leaves* demonstrate the Fowlers' broader influence on Whitman's poetry: the poet's phrenological methods of character interpretation in "Faces" (1855), for instance, and the organization of the "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" clusters according to the categories of Amativeness (sexual love) and Adhesiveness (love of friends). The Fowlers even published the second edition of *Leaves* and played a central role in the volume's distribution until Whitman broke with them in 1857. For a discussion of this break, see Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 121–22.
43. Although the Fowlers were not known for their agrarian politics, their physiological assessment of labor resonates with Whitman's writing. Reviewed by Whitman in 1847, Orson's *Physiology, Animal and Mental* (1847) promotes farming as a mode of bodily invigoration and opposes the idea that "labor is the business of slaves." The text stresses the physiological benefits of an agrarian lifestyle: "No form of play, no other kind of exercise, at all compares with LABOR, especially AGRICULTURAL, for expanding and strengthening the chest, developing all the organs, and thoroughly exercising every muscle and organ in the body." O. S. Fowler, *Physiology, Animal and Mental: Applied to the Preservation and Restoration of Health of Body,*

and Power of Mind, 5th ed. (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1850), 237, 232.

44. "The Eighteenth Presidency!" is not the only text that prioritizes men's health, muscularity, and labor. Likely written around the same time, Whitman's pseudonymously authored columns on "Manly Health and Training" (1858) are similarly obsessed with cultivating a healthy male population. Although the columns caution against too much time spent with women, they do acknowledge women's role in breeding and raising this ideal male population, while "The Eighteenth Presidency!" ignores this role completely. And although eugenics is not the main subject of "Manly Health and Training," Whitman is careful to emphasize that heredity and selective breeding deserve more attention in American culture. Walt Whitman, "Manly Health and Training," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33, nos. 3/4 (Winter/Spring 2016): 184–310; hereafter cited parenthetically as "MH."
45. Outka, "(De)composing Whitman," 56.
46. "This Compost" is informed by Justus von Leibig's *Organic Chemistry in Its Application to Agriculture and Physiology* (1840), which described the chemical transformation of decaying flesh into new life. For a recent discussion of this influence, see Lindsey Tuggle, *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2017), 44.
47. Like the "Corpse" in "Song of Myself," the bodies in "This Compost" prove to be "good manure." Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 245. And indeed, as Tuggle shows, "botanical regeneration underlies Whitman's antebellum poetics," particularly with regard to the decomposition of corpses and their incorporation into the environment. Tuggle, *Specimens*, 40.
48. Killingsworth, *Earth*, 11; Handley, *New World Poetics*, 143; and Gerhardt, *Humility*, 139.
49. For a reading of how women's passivity in "A Woman Waits for Me" resonates with phrenological ideas, see Sorisio, *Fleshing Out America*, 193.
50. As Dana Phillips notes, "Whitman's desire to invigorate women is related to his desire to have them inseminated: especially in the

great American West, women were to be the means for breeding the well-muscled Americans (that is, the 'superb' males) of the future." Phillips, "Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought," 313.

51. This characterization aligns with a broader emphasis on the maternal body in antebellum medical discourse. As Reynolds notes, "leading gynecologists helped popularize the idea that the womb was the all-defining part of woman; her sex organs, in effect, were herself, and reproduction was the great work of the sexes." Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 214.
52. As Reynolds shows, Whitman's writings express views similar to those of then-prominent New York gynecologist Augustus Kinsley Gardner, who claimed in his *Causes and Curative Treatment of Sterility* (1856) that "the secretion of the testicles … is the true spermatic, life-giving emanation." Interestingly, in a much later publication, Gardner articulated an explicitly nationalist reproductive vision, arguing that truly "patriotic parents" produce sturdy "new sons" to "sustain" the nation, especially in wartime. In this same work, Gardner emphasized the nation's demographic stability, contending that, with "no starving population," the United States is devoid of the "moral and physical pestilence" and "superabundance of poverty" that plagues Europe. See Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 215; Augustus Kinsley Gardner, *The Causes and Curative Treatment of Sterility, with a Preliminary Statement of the Physiology of Generation* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1856), 50; and Augustus Kinsley Gardner, *Our Children: Their Physical and Mental Development* (Hartford: Belknap and Bliss, 1872), 40, 36–37.
53. Whitman praised "healthy specimens of country life" in his "Manly Health and Training" series, published three years after "I Sing the Body Electric." Whitman, "Manly Health," 300.
54. Fowler, *Physiology*, 179.
55. See Zachary Turpin, "Introduction to Walt Whitman's 'Manly Health and Training,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33, nos. 3/4 (Winter/Spring 2016): 148, 156, 160. Written quickly and under financial pressure, "Manly Health" is likely one of Whitman's most plagiarized works, and it draws heavily on phrenology and eugenics. As Turpin writes, "Manly Health and Training" is "probably best

categorized as a side project, one of several freelance jobs Whitman took on during this period, anonymously or pseudonymously, for extra cash." Turpin, "Introduction," 161.

56. As Whitman writes, "good parentage is a great thing; but training, and proper and systematic exercise, are also capable of bringing out strength … in those who have not inherited it." Whitman, "Manly Health," 303.
57. Turpin, "Introduction," 171.
58. For a discussion of grass as a robust metaphor for agricultural prosperity, particularly during a period of agricultural crisis in the 1850s, see Maria Farland, "Expansive Exhibitions: Agriculture and Environment in Walt Whitman's Camden-Philadelphia Region" in *A Greene Country Towne: Philadelphia's Ecology in the Cultural Imagination*, ed. Alan C. Braddock and Laura Turner Igoe (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2016), 96–117.
59. For astute critiques of this scene, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "'To Stand Between': A Political Perspective on Whitman's Poetics of Merger and Embodiment," *ELH* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 926; and Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002), 131.
60. In an 1874 essay, Whitman characterized black suffrage as a form of political contamination. See Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall, vol. 2, *Collect and Other Prose* (New York: New York UP, 1964), 762. In a lesser-known manuscript entitled "Of the Black Question," likely written around 1867, Whitman imagines black extinction, contending that "Ethnological Science … settl[es] these things by evolution, by natural selection by certain races … helplessly disappearing by the slow, sure progress of laws." Geoffrey Sill, "Whitman on 'The Black Question': A New Manuscript," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 8, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 69. On Whitman's racial attitudes and their shift after Emancipation, see also Ed Folsom, "Erasing Race: The Lost Black Presence in Whitman's Manuscripts," in *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, ed. Ivy G. Wilson (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2014), 3–31.

61. Whitman kept a phrenological chart of an African American racial type in his scrapbook for poetic inspiration. See Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 471.
62. Echoing the physiological language of earlier poems, the speaker in "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" lauds the vigorous agrarian bodies—"tan-faced … youthful," "sinewy," and "resolute"—that "[head]" the "procession" of an ever-improving civilization. But unlike those earlier poems, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" presents an unwavering "evolutionary parade," as Aspiz calls it, with the advanced race "steady moving to the front" and the inferior races in the rear. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 372, 371, 374, 373; and Aspiz, *Body Beautiful*, 190. As a sequel to "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," "Song of the Redwood-Tree" represents the "*promised*" arrival of "*the new culminating man*," sanctifying Indigenous extinction, colonial violence, and ecological destruction as the "*predicted*" path to American plenty. Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 352. According to Steven Blakemore and Jon Noble, the poem presents a "covert linkage between the Indian removal and the ecological genocide of the redwoods." Blakemore and Noble, "Whitman and 'The Indian Problem': The Texts and Contexts of 'Song of the Redwood-Tree,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 22, nos. 2/3 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005): 118. For a discussion of how the poem romanticizes the extinction of Indigenous peoples, see Killingsworth, *Earth*, 69–71. For an assessment of Whitman's views on Indigenous peoples throughout his career, see Edward Whitley, "'The First White Aboriginal': Walt Whitman and John Rollin Ridge," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 52, nos. 1–2 (2006): 105–39.
63. For instance, true to his fascination with phrenology, Whitman looked to "Ethnological Science" rather than literary and political efforts to foretell the extinction of freed blacks in "Of the Black Question." Sill, "Whitman on 'The Black Question,'" 69. Also see Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 472. In a conversation with Horace Traubel in 1888, he articulated this prediction more succinctly: "The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated: it is the law of history, races, what-not: always so far inexorable—always to be.

Someone proves that a superior grade of rats comes and then all the minor rats are cleared out." Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Jeanne Chapman and Robert MacIsaac, vol. 8 (Oregon House: W. L. Bentley, 1996), 439.

64. For twentieth-century examples, see Theodore Roosevelt, "On American Motherhood," in *The World's Famous Orations*, vol. 10, *America–III: 1861–1905* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, [1906]; Bartleby.com, 2002), https://www.bartleby.com; and Lovett, *Conceiving*, 125–30.