UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS / INGLÊS E LITERATURA CORRESPONDENTE

DARING ART: EROTIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN AND ADRIENNE RICH

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Tese submetida à Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina em cumprimento parcial dos requisitos para obtenção do grau de

DOUTOR EM LETRAS

FLORIANÓPOLIS

Maio, 2006

Esta tese de Tacel Coutinho Leal, intitulada "Daring Art: Erotic Imagery in the Poetry of Walt Whitman and Adrienne Rich", foi julgada adequada e aprovada em sua forma final, pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras / Inglês e Literatura Correspondente, da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, para fins de obtenção do grau de

DOUTOR EM LETRAS

Área de concentração: Inglês e Literatura Correspondente
Opção: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

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Florianópolis, 22 de Maio de 2006.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people and institutions that have enabled me to conduct this study. I am aware that their support was fundamental for the completion of this project.

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, for her insights, valuable suggestions, and for her friendship and support.

I would also like to thank the professors from the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês e Literatura Correspondente of the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, especially Professors Mailce Borges Motta Fortkamp and Anelise Corseuil, for their support, kindness, and encouragement.

I also wish to thank CNPq and CAPES, the institutions that sponsored my research activities, including a visit to the University of Sussex, England. The bibliographical material I found there helped me with vital information for the development of this research. I also thank Professor Alan Sinfield for his encouragement and helpful comments.

I am also grateful to my friends Cristiane Barreto, Mike & Rafa, Gelson Peres da Silva, Leo & Francis, Raphael de Boer, and Armando for all their support, unconditional friendship, and for all the laughs we share.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my family for the best lessons I could have possibly learned in life.

ABSTRACT

DARING ART: EROTIC IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN AND ADRIENNE RICH

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2006

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Erotic representation is the main focus in this study. More specifically, this research is interested in alternative erotic representations that challenge patriarchal depictions advocating domination and hierarchy as natural attributes of human love relations. In order to do so, this work proposes an investigation of Walt Whitman's "Calamus," and Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a way to interrogate the narrowness of mainstream erotics. The corpus of this research is formed by works of leading poets and philosophers such as Plato, Octavio Paz, and Georges Bataille—theorists that have extensively discussed the question of the erotic—and by distinguished scholars from feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer studies such as Teresa de Lauretis, Ellen Greene, Catherine Belsey, Liz Yorke, Audre Lorde, Robert K. Martin, Jay Grossman, and Greg Woods, among others. This study demonstrates that both Whitman and Rich have not only questioned an entire system of patriarchal, excluding and erotic representation in their work, but have equally proposed a political strategy which is the product of a defying, and democratic erotics.

Number of pages: 141
Number of words: 43.987

RESUMO

ARTE OUSADA: IMAGENS ERÓTICAS NA POESIA DE WALT WHITMAN E ADRIENNE RICH

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As representações eróticas são o foco principal deste estudo. Mais especificamente, esta pesquisa tem por interesse a análise de representações eróticas que desafiem imagens patriarcais que advoguem a dominação e a hierarquia como atributos naturais das relações amorosas. Para tanto, este trabalho propõe uma investigação das obras "Calamus," de Walt Whitman, e "Twenty-One Love Poems," de Adrienne Rich, como uma maneira de interrogar as limitações do erotismo dito "mainstream." O *corpus* desta pesquisa é formado por obras de poetas e filósofos renomados como Platão, Octavio Paz e Georges Bataille - teóricos que discutiram extensivamente a questão do erótico - e por estudiosos de destaque nas áreas de feminismo, "gay and lesbian studies" e "queer studies", tais como Teresa de Lauretis, Ellen Greene, Catherine Belsey, Liz Yorke, Audre Lorde, Robert K. Martin, Jay Grossman e Greg Woods, entre outros. Este estudo demonstra que Whitman e Rich não apenas questionaram todo um sistema de representações eróticas patriarcais e excludentes, mas também propuseram uma estratégia política que é fruto de um erotismo desafiador e democrático.

Número de páginas: 141
Número de palavras: 43.987

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INTRODUCTION

Anais Nïn says in her *Journals* that eroticism is one of the fundamental means of self-knowledge we have—one that is as indispensable as poetry. Looking back in history, one sees that eroticism, the transformation of human sexual desire into imagery and metaphor (as seen in this study), has been a constant aspect in human thought. From philosophy to art, eroticism permeates human imagination and representation, sometimes defying the limits of sexual conventions. Self-knowledge is a key element if we are to understand the basic principles of eroticism. Being a limitless means of knowledge and expression, erotic representation can profoundly stimulate one's self-comprehension. Erotic representation triggers an immediate response by the spectator, and even if desire can be feigned to others, hardly one could deny it to himself / herself. This is the truest nature of eroticism: the quality of accessing one's inmost feelings and desires, allowing a rupture—whether temporary or not—with social norms and interventions.

Certainly because of its power of disruption eroticism has become the cause of severe religious and political worries. In Plato's *Symposium*, for instance, Pausanias's speech shows us how sexual practices and their representations characterize a social terrain under rigorous surveillance. What is drawn from Pausanias's speech is that one must strive for attaining self-countenance, never giving way to unrestricted sexual satisfaction—desire should follow a prescribed routine in order to be socially and morally justified. As he says: "to yield to a bad man in a bad way is wrong, but to yield to a worthy man in a right way is right" (50).

Plato's text is said to date not earlier than 385 B.C, but this approximate date gives us an idea of the primordial character of eroticism, and the social worries and sanctions it has long inspired. Since ancient times, sex, eroticism and love have been the object of strong intervention by the state. As a matter of fact, all three are intrinsically linked and cannot be completely set apart. In *The Double Flame—Love and Eroticism*, Octavio Paz claims that:

> sex, eroticism, and love are aspects of the same phenomenon, manifestations of what we call life. The oldest of the three, the most comprehensive and most basic, is sex. Sex is the primordial source. Eroticism and love are forms derived from the sexual instinct (…) As in the case of concentric circles, sex is the center and pivot point of this geometry of passion (7).

Moreover, Paz states that sex occupies exclusively the limited domain of "animate matter," whereas eroticism is the product of human inventiveness—eroticism belongs to the world of ideas.

As a human creation, one favoring the male subject since its origins, eroticism serves the purposes and the injunctions of male authority. As soon as the patriarchal apparatus understood the disruptive power of eroticism, it also realized that eroticism was a powerful tool for domination. Pausanias's speech in the *Symposium* is one example of how erotic practices were used to normalize behaviors, and establish hierarchies between the sexes. According to him, the nobler form of love was not only dedicated to ideas and the soul, but also (and principally) devoted to men. Ideas, intelligence and the soul were exclusively considered as male attributes. Women were relegated to the lower form of love, the one with no ideological or intellectual character, but purely physical aiming at procreation. Procreation was thus reduced to a necessity for survival and women were undervalued in every respect—all erotic practices in which they could partake were not the product of intellect. Being exclusively sexual, these erotic practices belonged to the world

of "animate matter," as Paz puts it. Therefore, women could not improve their social status because they were excluded from the start.

The history of eroticism is also the history of gender domination. Paradoxically, the same female identity that is dominated is also the center of attention in erotic representations—paintings, photograph, movies, and literature, all these media make use of female imagery widely. At the same time that these representations cast an erotic gaze on women, they also crystallize a bias about them that circulate in other areas of human interaction: women *become* these representations, and are stigmatized by them. Literature is full of examples of women who escape the social patterns of behavior and have to be punished because of that. Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, for instance, is a good example of the unconventional woman who surrenders to love and has to pay a high price. Others, such as Nabokov's *Lolita* are seductive women (in this case a young girl) who destroy the lives of men around them, and also have to pay for their daring attitude. In a similar way to Greek thought, romantic poetry has transformed women in unattainable ideals, devoid of sexual impulse or personality, always at the mercy of destiny and victims of impossible love. Victims or reprobates, women have repeatedly been underrated in mainstream erotic depictions, especially in movies and advertisement, not to mention pornography.

All other sexual minorities—gay men, lesbians, transsexuals, transgenders, intersex people, and bisexuals—are also victims of gender domination. To the great media, a large part of these people are almost inexistent. If on the one side patriarchal erotic representations do not include them, what could be a positive point because they would be free from male sanctioning, on the other they are utterly ignored by these depictions. Hence, they are dominated not by the exhaustion of their image—as with the case of women—but by their absence from the means of communication. The few erotic depictions

of male homosexuality, for instance, are biased, distorted representations that cannot escape the grip of gender domination, and the coercion of heterosexuality as the ruling (and only) norm.

This dissertation, however, is interested in erotic representations that escape and challenge the limitations imposed by gender domination. Because of that, alternative erotic representations are capable of widening the possibilities of human sexual and social interaction in ways patriarchal depiction cannot, or is not interested in doing. Literature, more specifically poetry, is the starting place where the alternative erotic depictions analyzed here are taken. The two works to be discussed here—Walt Whitman's "Calamus," and Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems"—are substantial sources for those interested in discussing erotic representations that do not follow the common patriarchal principles that dictate eroticism. Rather than founded in domination and hierarchies, Whitman's and Rich's erotic representations advocate a partnership that is the product of democracy, and human interchange. The erotic possibilities in their poetry are more complex, more fluid once they are not the product of capitalist logic and power relations.

At the same time that the erotic depictions present in "Calamus," and "Twenty-One Love Poems" are acute instruments of self-knowledge (Whitman literally says that along the poems), they simultaneously work as a rearview mirror displaying what patriarchal erotic representations fail to apprehend—i.e., the erotic / sexual possibilities of those outside the heterosexual matrix. Furthermore, the different epochs these poets belong to, and the conditions of production they have undergone are fundamental aspects to be considered in the discussion of their erotic representations and effects on public opinion. Summing up, the works analyzed here are examples that erotic representations can and

should express more diversified and democratic human possibilities, contesting the exclusions and limitations of patriarchal representations.

In the attempt to present eroticism from a contextual perspective, Chapter I begins with a brief account of the origins of the Greek myth of Eros—the different connotations the myth has undergone, and their influence on our present notion of eroticism—as a way to trace back the different aspects that the term, as a channel of communication and self-knowledge, encompasses. Next, I discuss Plato's *Symposium* not only because of its fundamental importance to this study, but especially to rethink the perpetuation of erotic representations oppressive to women and homosexuals. Both in the readings of Whitman's and Rich's poems, this issue will be extensively discussed—the challenge of alternative erotic representation lies in the rebelliousness against the secondary or submissive positions destined to women, and all the ones outside heterosexuality. The change of status of sexually oppressed people depends strongly on the renewal of mainstream erotic imagery. It is due time that different and unbiased possibilities of human interchange circulate widely—especially in a time when fundamentalism and bigotry seem to have increased enormously.

Chapter I also brings contribution from Octavio Paz, and Georges Bataille, theoreticians that have extensively discussed the question of eroticism. The basic aim is to see how eroticism *as representation* became an instrument of segregation. The constant flow of patriarchal erotic imagery create and perpetuate relations of oppression, and exclusion—feminist thinkers such as Teresa De Lauretis, Ellen Greene, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Liz Yorke, and Luce Irigaray have strongly questioned the power of those images. Their proposal is the creation of a female-centered erotics capable of rescuing

eroticism as a true means of self-knowledge and expression, and not as an instrument for the creation of gender asymmetry and exclusion. This chapter closes with a discussion on the oppression of sexual minorities—the deletion / negation of lesbian existence and male homosexuality from the means of knowledge production. As with women in Feminism in the past, the exclusion of homosexuals entered the agenda of the academy during the 1980s via gay and lesbian studies. Today, with the advance of gender studies, homosexual experience is conquering room outside academic circles (although these advances seem to be tightly connected to neoliberalist tactics of inclusion). Hence, the discussion of alternative erotic representations in Whitman and Rich is also a way of questioning (by contrast) the inclusion of gay culture via economic power.

Chapter II discusses erotic representations in Whitman's "Calamus." This cluster of poems, included only later, on the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, brings one of the most innovative depictions of male homosexual love in American literary history. The poems have caused disputes not only because Whitman has dared to touch this theme (though its existence is still ignored by many critics), but also because he has opposed the dominant patriarchal erotics. The chapter discusses how the male love relationships Whitman describes differ from both patriarchal eroticism and the hierarchical model of male love we find in Plato's *Symposium*, for instance. It begins with a discussion on Whitman's definition of *adhesiveness,* a concept taken from his book *Democratic Vistas*—the word is meant to categorize love relationships between men, and describes an essential attribute to the full incorporation of democracy in America.

Whitman's politics of inclusion (through democracy) and the particular position of women in this politics and in his poetic practice are also addressed in this chapter. Although in *Democratic Vistas* Whitman makes a plea to the rights of women, he does not include

them—at least not as central characters—in his songs to homosexual love. It is not that women are not welcomed in the fantastic realms of male love the poet creates, but his songs to potent, athletic or tender love between men seem not to accommodate them. Robert K. Martin has argued in *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* that "Calamus" has to be seen as Whitman's open statement (and acceptance) about his homosexuality. Hence, he

> unlike so many male poets, does not regard women as sexual objects even in his ostensibly heterosexual poems. The homosexual, whose sexuality is directed toward other men, is free to see women as human beings, and thus we find in Whitman a strong sense of compassion for figures of suffering women—the mother, the prostitute, the spinster (8).

This discussion will be later expanded in my Conclusion where I comment on Whitman's use of a female persona on the celebrated Section 11 of "Song of Myself," and his treatment of women and male homosexuality in *Leaves of Grass* as a whole.

Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" are the main focus of Chapter III. Hence, the chapter begins with a parallel between her text and Whitman's, examining their differences and pointing out what they have in common. As with the second chapter, some theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter I will be in dialogic relation with the poems. Rich's prose production—especially "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," and *What is Found There*—resonate much of what the "Twenty-One Love Poems" discuss, so the ideas behind these theoretical works will also permeate the reading of the poems. Other theorists such as De Lauretis, Greene, Yorke, and Irigaray are brought to the discussion as well. Rich's powerful re-vision of patriarchal history has in the "Poems" perhaps her most sharp example. The "Poems" appropriate the patriarchal Elizabethan sonnets to create an erotic representation that has the female at the center of the stage. Just as Whitman's emphasis on democracy and homosexuality establishes new grounds for male love, Rich's reliance on the sharing of female experience, support, and partnership renovate the limited roles

destined to lesbian experience in ways that are alien, or utterly opposed to patriarchal representations.

My concluding chapter is devised as an opportunity for dialogue—the ideas about eroticism discussed in Chapter I, and the theory about gender and sexual politics dialogue with the outcome of the analyses in Chapters II and III. The discussion of Whitman and Rich is expanded, in an attempt to tackle controversial aspects of both poets. Whitman's treatment of women in *Leaves of Grass*, "Calamus," and *Democratic Vistas* is further discussed with emphasis on Martin's considerations on Section 11 of "Song of Myself." Yorke's observation about the accusations of essentialism in Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far* is considered against the outcome of the discussion of the "Poems." The texts analyzed here are reminders that eroticism, rather than being a limiting tool for segregation and hierarchy when misrepresented because of political, economic, and religious reasons, is a potent mechanism of knowledge. As long as erotic representations continue to be treated as a simple commodity by mainstream, the domination of sexual minorities will continue. Whitman's "Calamus," and Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" have opened up ways to confront patriarchal eroticism—the fact that some of their daring proposals have not been recognized yet is something to be remembered—their contribution is relevant to any discussion of sexual politics and erotic representation, and this is the main reason of their being together in this study.

CHAPTER I

Desire [is] the father of fantasy. (Octavio Paz)

1-Theorizing Eroticism—Metaphors of the Body

Looking at the word eroticism one will find in its roots "Eros," a name invested with abundant meanings and different connotations throughout time. In *Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes*, Ann-Deborah Lévy argues that Eros was "one of the divinities in the Greek pantheon" (412), an entity that could assume distinct interpretations and functions in ancient Greece. According to her, it was during the seventh century BC (Hesiod's *Theogony*) that the entity appeared for the first time in a Greek text. Eros is one of the three generative forces—i.e., Chaos, Earth (Gaia) and Love (Eros)—when the universe was created. In the same text, he is also described as a force of attraction that ensured "both the cohesion and the perpetuity of the universe."

From this point on, the entity assumed many different personae. He can be a "demiurge, a primordial god with outstanding beauty, or an abstract or unreal (winged) boy" (413-14). In Greek erotic poetry Eros is depicted sometimes as a young boy with wings, and Euripides "introduces the bow and arrows with which he wounds lover's hearts" (415). The divinity here is regarded as cruel once he manipulates his "victims" and causes suffering.

In the six speeches that compose Plato's *Symposium*, the figure of Eros receives different and contradicting characteristics as well. Eros is depicted as young and old, a demon half-way between god and man, linked to "masculine love and spiritual matters"

(414) or concerned with male/female, physical love—the first kind (masculine love) being considered a nobler form of love than the second one, limited to procreation. Lévy argues that two important aspects must be highlighted in the *Symposium*: "that love between men is regarded more favorably than love between men and women; and that Eros has an initiatory role" (414).

According to Lévy, with the passing of time, the entity entered Western literature "by way of Byzantine and Latin verse under the names Amor or Cupid. Nonetheless, his image was adapted to suit the tastes and requirements of different periods and authors" (415). Thus, the figure of Eros has always been a central theme in human thought—from a myth with an uncountable number of representations in the past (some of them transformed in an excuse for domination and containment), to a theme for political disputes in our contemporary world. The fact is that few divinities in the Greek pantheon have caused such lasting influence as Eros did (maybe Psyche, too).

Picture 1 – Eros Statue in Piccadilly Circus, London

The word eroticism, a derivation of Eros, dialogues with some of the definitions the Greek entity has received along the centuries. His double nature, his active participation in sexual desire, the suffering and pain he causes, and his initiatory role—all these characteristics are present in the word *eroticism*. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines eroticism as "the quality of stimulating sexual desire," a considerably partial definition for a concept that can signify so much more.

Maybe one of the best contemporary attempts to define the nature of eroticism is to be found in Octavio Paz's *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*. In the book, Paz presents a historically based account of the formation of concepts involving the words eroticism and love along the centuries, and presents their relation to other crucial elements such as sex, sexuality, literature, and the different cultural practices in which they are inscribed.

Perhaps because he is a poet himself, Paz begins the discussion by making a parallel between eroticism and poetry—a definition that will be of utmost importance to this research once it aims at analyzing a possible evolution of the concept of eroticism in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Adrienne Rich. Paz claims that "[t]he relationship between eroticism and poetry is such that it can be said, without affectation, that the former is a poetry of the body and the latter an eroticism of language" (2). In his view, this is a relationship of opposition once language—"a material trace that denotes nonmaterial things" (3)—can define feelings, sensation, i.e., a material, concrete system is able to give life to something abstract, evanescent. Conversely, he says, eroticism is not "mere animal sexuality; it is ceremony, representation. It is sexuality transfigured, a metaphor" (3).

Hence, the notion of eroticism goes beyond the sex act itself as it demands creation, representation, and ideas. Imagination, Paz affirms, is the agent that causes both the erotic

and the poetic act: “Imagination turns sex into ceremony and rite, language into rhythm and metaphor” (3). Eroticism, then, extrapolates the mere animal sexuality: it involves imagination, creation, human intellectual potential; and poetry, by its turn, transforms ordinary language into something richer, more complex and refined.

This human characteristic can be seen in another important distinction made by Paz: the difference between eroticism and sexuality. For him

> eroticism is, above all else, exclusively human: it is sexuality socialized and transfigured by the imagination and the will of human beings. The first thing that distinguishes eroticism from sexuality is the infinite variety of forms in which it manifests itself. (9)

Thus, Paz affirms, while sex is always the same (in the animal world), eroticism is plural and demands constant variation. Moreover, because imagination and desire are central elements in the erotic game, he continues, “one or several of the players can be an imaginary being.” Nevertheless, the plural is fundamental because “even in the so-called solitary pleasures sexual desire always invents an imaginary other ... or many others” (9).

A last difference between eroticism and sexuality pointed by Paz has to do with copulation. He says “animals always copulate in the same way; humans look at themselves in the mirror of universal animal copulation, and as they imitate it, they transform it in their own sexuality” (10). Because of eroticism (i.e. imagination) human sexuality “becomes a terrifying and prodigious diversity,” a diversity that is also present when it comes to representations of human sexuality.

Paz argues that eroticism is sexuality socialized, a human creation. In addition, he attributes to eroticism a social, protective function in our societies. According to him, our culture is an amalgam of all the “practices, institutions, rites, ideas, and artifacts” (10) we have created. Within this culture “eroticism is sex, nature; by its being a human creation

and by its functions in society, it is culture. One of the aims of eroticism is to take sex and make a place for it in society" (10). Paz highlights the fact that sex has almost always been regarded as subversive once it threatens social stability. Sex is, at the same time, society's salvation (because of procreation) and destruction (because of its overflow). Unlike animals, Paz states, humans have a sex drive that experience no "periods of rut and sexual dormancy." Humans are the only creatures in nature that do not "possess an automatic physiological regulator of sexual activity" (11).

It is precisely here that eroticism enters as a regulator for the insatiable human sexual instinct. According to Paz, "we have had to invent rules that channel the sexual instinct and protect society from its overflow … The human race, subjected to the perpetual electrical discharge of sex, has invented a lightning rod: eroticism" (11). However, this was an "ambiguous invention"—eroticism is, at the same time,

> repression and license…sublimation and perversion. And the primal function of sexuality—reproduction—is subordinated to other ends, some of them social and some of them individual. Eroticism protects society from onslaughts of sexuality but it also negates the reproductive function. It is the capricious servant of life and death. (11)

Here, the double nature of the entity Eros can be rescued once again as being one of the most important elements that compose the ambiguous notion of eroticism. Both in the myth of Eros and in the word eroticism the paradox life / death is present—an indication that what may cause pleasure can also be the cause for suffering.

Coincidentally, the same paradox is a central argument of another seminal text about the trope. Georges Bataille´s *Erotism* places eroticism halfway between an overabundance of life and a longing for death. Exploring multiple themes such as religion, murder, sacrifice, taboos, and prostitution, Bataille refers to eroticism as "assenting to life up to the point of death." According to him, if a definition of eroticism were called forth,

the starting point would obligatorily be sexual reproductive activity. In fact, eroticism is seen as a special form of this kind of activity—one that is exclusive to human kind. Among all sexual animals "only men appear to have turned their sexual activity into erotic activity." As a human creation, eroticism becomes a form of sexual activity independent of reproduction and familial responsibilities. For Bataille, the paradox lies in the fact that eroticism—though carrying an exuberance of life—is a "psychological quest" in which the main object "is not alien to death" (11).

The object pursued in this psychological quest (which is eroticism itself) is an attempt at experiencing a feeling of continuity, i.e., a state of permanence that all human kind would miss and long for. For Bataille, reproduction presupposes the creation of *discontinuous* beings. In this discontinuous existence "each being is distinct from all others … He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (12). The nostalgia produced by this transitory state we experience—or better, the attempt to overcome it—is the main object behind the erotic game.

There are two occasions in which human beings can reverse this feeling of discontinuity—one is death, the other is eroticism. In great part, the human fascination with death lies in the fact that death represents permanence. Because we are discontinuous beings "death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death" (13). The element that triggers the erotic impulse in us is closely connected with the principle of continuity that links death and reproduction. Therefore, death is not unfamiliar to the erotic activity as well.

In fact, erotic experience is capable of delivering "a feeling of profound continuity" (15)—one of a different nature, though. Unlike in death, the feeling of continuity

transmitted by eroticism is short-lived because of its duration. In order to accomplish this, a change of state is necessary to attain the fulfillment granted by erotic satisfaction. According to Bataille, the "transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity." Every erotic activity must be endowed with a certain extent of *dissolution*, and it is not possible to experience erotic (sexual) desire in the normal state. Dissolution, in his account, matches with "*dissolute life*, the familiar phrase linked with erotic activity." However, the two participants in the erotic activity must have specific roles for the dissolution to happen. During this process:

> the male partner has generally the active role, while the female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. (17)

Because of the melancholy produced by our discontinuity, by our overwhelming "self-contained character" (17), we do not bear to live solely in our normal state. Eroticism becomes a mechanism that people bring into play in order to escape their normal state of isolation to enter in a world of shared familiarity. The fusion achieved by the participants during orgasm carries a feeling of permanence, eternity—a temporary solace from the loneliness of our human condition.

The problem is that this feeling is fleeting, lasting for a brief moment only. Paz has called attention to the fact that the human sex drive is never at rest, and that humans are the only beings in nature unequipped with an automatic physiological regulator for their sexual activity. A detailed study on the relation of both reflections would be necessary—the philosophical questions that come up in Bataille´s theory alongside with the physiological

peculiarities devised by Paz. We spend most of our lives longing for physical contact, for connections, but the sensation of continuity delivered by each erotic experience is always temporary. The two aspects seem to form a vicious circle—one in which we are never satisfied. Interestingly, eroticism is the instrument that converts the philosophical need for something higher, bigger, and the biological urge for physical contact into rite, ceremony, and representation.

Bataille´s definition of eroticism, however, expands the concept to a somewhat conflicting direction. Far from seeing eroticism as an exclusively creative force, he ascribes to the concept the domain of violence, violation. In his opinion, the change of state from discontinuity to continuity—just like in the reproduction of minute organisms—cannot be achieved unless a certain degree of violence is applied. Every being that comes into existence through discontinuity has experienced this violence. Conversely, the essence of physical eroticism partakes of the same violence, and it can also be a destructive force: "what does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?—a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder?" (17).

Ultimately, it is our human nature that is violated. The intense change of state from discontinuity to continuity during physical eroticism, in a sense, infringes on our instinct for self-preservation. As Bataille says, "the whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still" (17). By performing this symbolic destructive act, we detach ourselves from our normal lives, we transcend our limitations—and we momentarily transgress our state of isolation.

If we think about the way some mainstream erotic representations depict women and sexual dissidents, we come to the conclusion that a good deal of these representations also involve a kind of violation, but one aiming at domination, political advantage. It is the

opposite of shaking us out of our normal lives, of waking us up—instead, these representations work as a mechanism that perpetuates male supremacy, maintains our self-contained character, and blurs our senses. The establishment with its complete dependence on heterosexuality is thus secured through this subliminal violence—erotic representation becomes a powerful mechanism for exclusion. A deeper consideration on the social (mis)use of eroticism will be presented in the next section of this research.

Having in mind all the ideas discussed so far, one can only address eroticism as a multiple, slippery category. The variety of characteristics involving the idea, and their conflicting nature, complicate enormously any attempt at defining it. At the same time that eroticism works as a cathartic element, it is an unconscious desire for destruction, annihilation—a flirt with death. If eroticism is the site of so many discrepancies and disputes, how have different classes of people negotiated their erotic practices with the norms that make up the social apparatus? How can eroticism be represented in a way that can suit the morals of Western civilization? And more important, who is authorized to obtain pleasure?

Catherine Belsey claims in *Desire—Love Stories in Western Culture* that the tension is solved through the incorporation of what she defines as "true love." According to her, the division between mind and body that had always characterized Western culture since medieval times and the Enlightenment Europe is unified with the assimilation of the idea of true love, especially in literature. The idea of consciousness, of persons as thinking subjects was a product of the Enlightenment Europe, and the physical necessities of the body were held as a minor and even dangerous aspect. True love, however,

> promises to bring mind and body back into perfect unity, to heal the rift in experiences which divides individuals from themselves. Physical sensation, the overwhelming intensity of erotic desire, is to be brought into harmony

> with rational and moral commitment, a shared life of sympathy and support, freely and confidently chosen. (23)

Hence, our continuous inclination towards sexual activity, the human permanent sex drive that Paz has pointed out, is simultaneously brought into harmony with the moral restrictions imposed by society, and with the promise of idyllic matrimonial life. True love can be the perfect alibi to release all the possibilities of physical explorations, and still provide a concrete and socially approved possibility for continuity, permanence.

For Belsey, the dualism of passion in conflict with morality has been transcended by the incorporation of true love. In fact, it "licenses the release of pleasure, irradiating the vertiginous excitement of erotic activity with an ideal glow. And it undertakes at the same time to unite two subjectivities not only with each other but within themselves (23)—that is, the gap that divides two beings "from themselves" is healed. Similar to the sensation of continuity provided by physical eroticism, true love restores all the anxieties from our divided subjectivity and gives us a "utopian wholeness" (23). The trouble starts when the idea of true love that is sold by romances becomes an ideal to follow, and an emblem that dictates patterns of behavior.

In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis has shown how "the representation of gender *is* its construction" (3). The idea of true love and the pressure of heterosexuality permeate enormously erotic representations in Western society. Heterosexual marriage is the only occasion in which a couple can have access to physical pleasure and to social and moral respectability at the same time. This study is aware of the way eroticism has been presented and validated as male in Western representations. Because of that, different sexual minorities have been stigmatized by verbal and visual erotic images that perpetuate bigotry and intolerance. My interest is to investigate the way those who are not included

under the umbrella of true love and marriage manage to experience and represent their desire. I believe Whitman´s "Calamus" and Rich´s "Twenty-One Love Poems" can offer splendid material for this investigation, not only for their geniality and defying eroticism, but also for their historical relevance to the discussion of alternative sexual practices and their representations.

2-Eroticism, Female Homosexual Desire, and Representation

The production of representations advocating biased gender relations can take place in the most varied and unexpected settings. If we take Bataille´s *Erotism*, for instance, many striking controversies will come up along its metaphors and images. Of course we are talking about a book written in the 1950s—sexual behavior and studies of sexuality were strongly influenced by psychoanalysis, and questions regarding gender relations were not identified in the way we regard them today. Even if these relations were already being shown in literature, for example, there was little political consciousness or organization.

The strict moral code and persecutions established by the Cold War left little room for discussion and difference. Only one decade later, the debate about gender oppression would start to be perceived as a pressing political question. When in the 1960s the first feminist manifestations started to be recognized, people became aware that the perfect family model of the fifties was incapable of encompassing all the changes that were to be disclosed. Women became aware that the promise of true love and marriage was not sufficient to guarantee fairer political rights and a better treatment to them.

Right in the beginning of his book, Bataille states that the objective study of eroticism, though interesting and necessary, is a secondary consideration in his analysis.

His main purpose is, in fact, to "see in eroticism an aspect of man's inner life, of his religious life" (31), and he admits that his study is closer to theology than to science or history. Hence, the philosophical approach he chooses does not tackle social aspects such as the power relations implied in some erotic associations, or the creation of inflexible gender roles carried by the abuse of erotic representations in patriarchal society.

The first controversy that becomes visible in his discourse is the prevalence of male modes of perception in detriment of female ones. Whether it is in the use of a pronoun (a partial dissolution of the person as *he* exists in the realm of discontinuity), or in the utilization of a masculine perspective and sexuality as the starting point to his philosophical explorations, Bataille´s notion of eroticism is considered mostly in terms of its male aspects. The images he uses reinforce the idea of hierarchy in the relations between man and woman, and male alleged superiority is left uncontested. As a result, female erotics and sexuality do not receive the proper attention they deserve, and the study is rendered incomplete, if not tendentious.

Second, Bataille claims that the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence and violation. However, he does not expand his analysis to discuss the nature of this violence, and most important, the political consequences of this symbolic violation to women. Implicit in his sexual metaphors is the patriarchal model of social organization that recurrently favours the male subject. The erotic violation he is claiming should be further developed and analyzed in other fields of human interaction—those social areas (such as education, job opportunities, civil rights) in which women and all other sexual minorities have been constantly precluded.

Finally, he fails to recognize political and social implications in his account of the process of dissolution during orgasm. Despite the fact that both partners are mingled in this

fusion, it is usually the female side the one to be "dissolved as a separate entity." Bataille´s greatest mistake is to see in female alleged *passivity only* one meaning—a kind of conduit that would allow both partners to be mingled, united in a fusion where political and social implications are inexistent. Once he claims that the male partner has *generally* the active role, he is signaling by contrast his awareness of a different, alternative organization to that scheme—a sexual association where women would not be seen, and treated as merely passive participators. When does the male cease to have the active role in the sexual encounter? Under which circumstances can this happen? What political questions are implied here?

Bataille's esoteric, spiritual explanation conceals the abuses and aggressions that women have experienced along the centuries in the name of their imposed passivity, a condition that goes far beyond the sexual encounter. Thus, his utopian model is part of a patriarchal practice which sees eroticism as a manifestation that corroborates to maintain an imbalanced social structure—one in which domination and hierarchy are constructed as the *natural* order of things. Bataille´s apparent uniform treatment of gender seems to be circumscribed only to orgasm, the only moment when men and women can have the same subjective status.

Erotic representations may have many purposes—they can be a means of self-expression, a form of knowledge, and an act of communication. On a social level, they construct and establish fixed gender roles, and, according to Paz, they regulate and socialize sexual practices. However, the act of normalizing and representing sex has also brought with its restrictions a series of disparities and injustices that are crystallized in the form of specific patterns of behavior. The patriarchal apparatus not only created "protective" rules

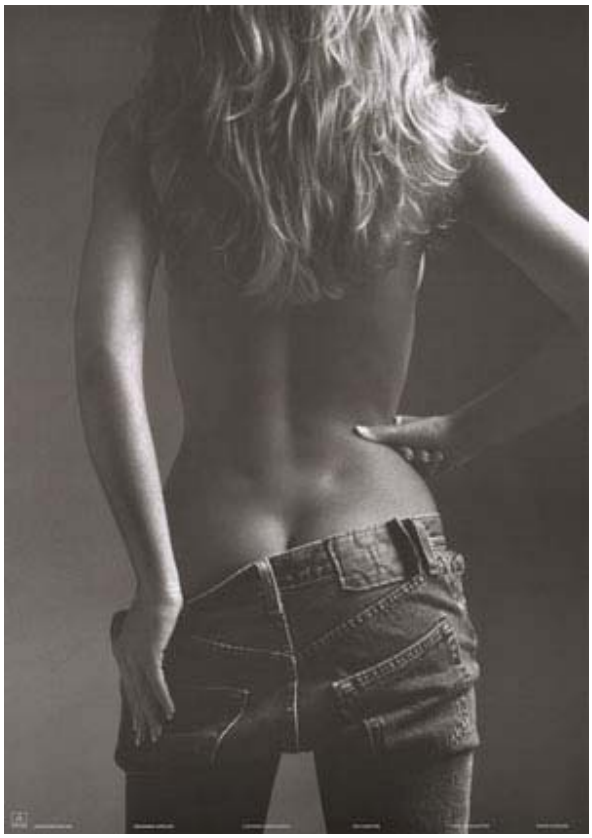
to regulate sex, it also established men's supremacy over women in the fields of sexuality, knowledge, and power, to mention a few.

But this is hardly news in academic circles, especially nowadays. Due to the advent of feminism (and more recently cultural studies and queer studies), patriarchy started to be massively questioned and challenged. However, because our society (and its institutions) has always been male centered, eroticism has been defined through male perspectives. As a consequence, we were left with an unfair, chauvinistic and mainstream view of eroticism. What we have—or better, what prevails—is an eroticism characterized by the existence of exploitation, and subjugation towards women, and everyone who escapes the heterosexual contract. The imagination used in representations of the erotic game, with few exceptions, has been basically male. This is not the same as saying women do not have sexual imaginative potential, quite the contrary. Somehow, they must have been prevented to access the means for expressing it.

One needs only to look at advertisements to understand that. The simple act of taking a magazine and browsing over a piece of advertisement—for example, a commercial for jeans—might convey a series of detrimental images towards women. It is possible to name some characteristics that are frequently present in this kind of media: many ads bring a man and a woman half naked, the woman generally is in a lower position or lying, many times the man is pushing her to a wall or bed (sometimes in a menacing attitude), and the woman's facial expression gives the impression that this is exciting, and that she likes it.

The sexual encounter involves coercion and domination, and most movies, magazine ads, and TV shows contribute to the idea that women have to be "conquered," and that they enjoy it. Perhaps this might be a desperate attempt to perpetuate the idea that

women are—or should be—submissive to men. We should remember that commercials do not sell only goods; they sell ideas, and concepts, too.



Picture 2 – Eroticism in Advertisements

Paz calls attention to the fact that democratic capitalism "has applied the impersonal laws of the market and the technology of mass production to erotic life" (195). The human body (and beauty) has been transformed into a widely used sign in advertisement today. Because modernity has "desacralized the body, and advertisement has used it as a marketing tool," eroticism became a simple commodity, or "a department of advertising

and a branch of business" (196-197)—a branch of business directed predictably to the male gaze.

Picture 3 – Patriarchal Eroticism in Virtual Comics

Feminists have been trying to reverse the unfair model of social organization proposed by patriarchy (and the consequent erotic domination) for decades, and many theories have come up in the last decades. A good example is Ellen Greene's essay "Sappho, Foucault, and Women's Erotics"—a severe critique on Michel Foucault's model of ancient sexuality, and a proposal for an alternative, female-centered erotics. Greene begins her text quoting Jessica Benjamin who says: "what alternative to the phallus is there

… can we discern the rudiments of another way of representing desire—woman's desire—even in the midst of patriarchal culture?" (1). The word "rudiments" gives the right extent of the problem. Patriarchal eroticism is so dominating that when one tries to evade it, the task proves to be monumental. In order to oppose a whole set of patriarchal erotic imagery, women have to contest political structures that have been present for centuries—the Establishment not only intervenes in erotic life, but also adopts some of the erotic codes as an instrument for political control.

According to Greene, Benjamin's assertion points to a central problem in Foucault's account of sexuality and power relations in his trilogy *The History of Sexuality*. Greene states that feminist theorists have identified two main points in Foucault's theory that deserve criticism: "1) his omission of the historical construction of sexuality as gender-specific and 2) his use of masculine forms of erotic practice as his model for ancient sexuality in general" (1). In her view, Foucault favoured a phallic mode of representation "which organizes and represents erotic relations as necessarily hierarchical and power-driven" (2) when he presumed that the model of masculine behavior found in Plato's text could be transferred to feminine behavior.

What Greene is affirming is that Foucault's basic examples in his analysis of ancient sexuality focus exclusively on the male model of love and eroticism found in Plato's *Symposium*. The nobler form of love to Greek men, as we see in Pausanias speech, was the love dedicated to intelligence and the soul—in opposition to a love that would be debasing and carnal. This nobler form of love considered praiseworthy, linked to high ideals was the one involving masters and boys-apprentices.

The practice consisted in a hierarchical relationship between an old, experienced man (the active partner) and a young, inexperienced boy (the passive partner). This unequal

love relationship, with a series of rules for courtship, had the purposes of initiation. In the moment the first beard started to grow in the boy, the relationship was doomed to end. The boy, then, would assume his place in society. Foucault's mistake was to focus his entire account of ancient sexuality on this male model. Women, then, are almost completely ignored by him. It is as if women could mirror themselves in this male model to understand and cope with their own sexuality—and, for obvious historical reasons, they cannot.

Consequently, Greene says, Foucault's analysis is entirely "male-specific" and "inseparably linked to the larger patriarchal ideology of Greek culture." Foucault's "gender blindness in his insistence that sexuality and power are coextensive" (2) has also been tackled by Teresa de Lauretis. In *Technologies of Gender*, she demonstrates how the negation of gender—even when done with the best of intentions—has, once again, privileged patriarchal society. She says:

> Hence the paradox that mars Foucault's theory, as it does other contemporary, radical but male-centered, theories: in order to combat the social technology that produces sexuality and sexual oppression, these theories (and their respective politics) will deny gender. But to deny gender, first of all, is to deny the social relations of gender that constitute and validate the sexual oppression of women; and second, to deny gender is to remain in "ideology"—an ideology which (not coincidentally if, of course, not intentionally) is manifestly self-serving to the male-gendered subject. (15)

For Greene as for De Lauretis, the male ideology present in Foucault's account of Greek sexuality underlies an erotics based on the practices of domination, competition, and hierarchies. Also, Foucault's male-centered view implies "the subjection of women" through erotic and gender domination. His account of ancient sexuality is, then, not "gender-neutral" but "an extension of his male-centered view" (2-3). In a sense, both Bataille and Foucault speak from the same privileged position, and their discourses are thus

filtered by this very position. The Establishment authenticates and corroborates this apparently unsuspected credibility.

Sappho is chosen by Greene to answer Benjamin's question raised in the epigraph of her essay—what alternative to the phallus is there? In Greene's view, Sappho's poetry is a powerful alternative to the male-centered model of power presented by Foucault. Some of her poems exemplify a concept developed by Benjamin called *intersubjective experience*—"that space in which the mutual recognition of subjects can compete with the reversible relationship of domination" (quoted in Greene 4). Instead of the agreement between two unequal halves that *complement* each other, there is a coexistence of two complete beings that relate on an equal basis founded in interchange and mutual respect.

Sappho's fragments offer an alternative erotic practice and discourse that challenge the dominant ideology and discourse of "complementarity" (a patriarchal mode of perception *par excellence*) with a discourse of "mutuality" (4), i.e., the mutual recognition between two beings, in the organization of female experience. And this female experience, as Greene points out, was undeniably a homoerotic one: "in a society as male-dominated as Sappho's most likely was, one can easily see that the expression of active desire for *women as subjects* was most accessible in the context of an autonomous and homoerotic woman's culture" (5).

The attempt to construct a female perspective of the world that can resist male (erotic) domination is equally present in Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." The same attempt is to be found in many of her poems; and especially the "Twenty-One Love Poems" reverberate the defying position she presents in theory. Rich´s political project of creating *the erotic in female terms* (my italics)

points to a refusal and resistance to the heterosexual contract as she redefines and widens the scope of patriarchal definitions about lesbianism.

In fact, Rich refuses the term lesbianism due to its "clinical and limiting ring" (217). Instead, she introduces the terms *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*—the former meant to portray "both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuous creation of the meaning of that existence," and the latter to signal (historically) the existence of "woman identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (217).

What Rich is proposing here is a new dimension to look at lesbian experience—one that expands the mere fact of physical contact to include a new range of (socially) lived experiences. Also, she inscribes her essay and practice in an ongoing social project of creating a new meaning to this highly oppressed social identity. Because the term *lesbianism* brings in its patriarchal definition a clinical and limiting ring, lesbian experience became fragmented, contained: "female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself" (218). These patriarchal definitions ended by separating female experiences in nearly opposite terms, one experience automatically excluding the other. Thus, lesbian experience became solely associated with the fact that two women may have sexual contact together, and nothing else.

However, Rich says, as one deepens the analysis of what she defines as *lesbian existence,* one needs to consider "the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself" (218). She is, in fact, referring to those female experiences other than simply the sexual ones (or at least not only), i.e., female friendship, support, and solidarity that can be equally pervaded by the same joy one finds in body erotics. Far from confining eroticism solely to the bed, this new perception

expands the concept towards wider possibilities, thus challenging and revising biased patriarchal assumptions.

In Rich's opinion, the pressing necessity to create a female erotics is accomplished through Audre Lorde's definition of eroticism as "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic" as well as the sharing of work and support which "makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (218). The inclusion of these new dimensions into lesbian experience opens up a whole new range in female relationships that were set aside and repressed. Hence, this strategy subverts distorted mainstream representations and the complete effacement of lesbian existence from the processes of significance.

Rich´s and Lorde's ideas converge with Jessica Benjamin's concept of intersubjective experience—they propose an alternative, not authoritarian model for human relationships. Individuals can interrelate, exchange (erotic / love) experiences differently from the ways based on models marked by domination, competition, and power relations. However, these patriarchal models can also be effectively challenged as one considers Luce Irigaray's claims for sexual difference in western culture.

In *Je, Tu, Nous*, Irigaray argues that, despite all the technological advances in our culture, sex has been relegated to a secondary position in the order of things, a position apart from civilization. For her, sexuality "though said to be private, cannot possibly escape from social norms" (16). Our civilization, then, can only achieve maturity through the full incorporation of a sexed culture.

The problem with the incapacity of acknowledging sexual difference in western culture is that it ends by favoring social injustices and hierarchies. In her opinion "[t]he

decline of sexual culture goes hand in hand with the establishment of different values which are supposedly universal but turn out to entail one part of humanity having a hold over the other, here the world of men over that of women" (16). Real intersubjective experiences—and not dissolution as proposed by Bataille—can only be possible when sexual difference is fully recognized, and our identities and social status cease to be dictated by our biological gender, color, or sexual preference.

Irigaray believes that "[t]his social injustice, which nowadays goes unrecognized, must be interpreted and modified so as to liberate our subjective potential in systems of exchange, in the means of communication and creation" (16). As long as we continue living according to "male genealogical systems," the experiences based on exchange, the intersubjectivity mentioned by Benjamin and Irigaray, can never achieve their totality.

For Irigaray, women should stop looking for equality as one indispensable characteristic in achieving their full subjectivity. In her opinion "the demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To whom or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To a salary? To a public office? To what standard? Why not to themselves?" (12). Because women are explored in the grounds of sexual difference, it is only through sexual difference that they will change their situation: "[i]n order to obtain a subjective status equivalent to that of men, women must therefore gain recognition for their difference" (46). When women achieve the same subjective status of men, erotic domination will become obsolete, incongruent, and erotic representations will be seen apart from power relations and oppression.

The Establishment knows that the erotic is a disruptive, dangerous force—it is one of the ways through which women can achieve the desired subjective status, and maybe this is the reason why erotic representations are constantly under scrutiny. Far from being a

constraint or a controlling force, the erotic has to be seen as a liberating energy. Though eroticism has been appropriated and distorted by patriarchy, Audre Lorde claims in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" that the erotic is, in fact, a profoundly female condition. She believes that the erotic "is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (1).

Lorde has called attention to the fact that the erotic "has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation." Misguided by all these distortions, many women have failed to recognize the knowledge that may come from the erotic, or even worse, they have confused it with the pornographic: "but pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling" (2). And, as she has pointed out, sensation by itself is not enough—sensation alone is the outcome of the distortion of eroticism, it is a false freedom.

According to Lorde´s perception, the erotic encounter is the one able to promote mutual respect and real communication between the participants—"to share the power of each other´s feelings is different from using another´s feelings as we use a Kleenex" (8). Truly intersubjective experiences are, then, pervaded by the same joy that comes from the erotic. It goes without saying that patriarchal capitalist systems and their industry of representation and profit have obstructed this kind of experience—it has become an exception amidst the great scheme of things. And this scheme is characterized almost exclusively by a heterosexual compulsion. The next section of this research explores the mistreatment of male homosexual sexuality and the consequent suppression of male homoerotic representations.

3- Male Homoeroticism and the Deletion of Homosexuality

So far we have been discussing new ways of representing women's desire, ways to evade erotic domination and the common stereotypes provided by patriarchal representations. Likewise, gay men have been trying for decades to evade from male-centered organization and its stereotypical representations as well. If women have been trying to be granted the right of representing desire in their own terms, gay men have been fighting sometimes for the mere right of existing. In a society as male oriented as the one we live in, gay men are seen as escaping the heterosexual norm, and this is a threat to the Establishment. Consequently, their self-representations are most likely to be rejected and retaliated. Whenever one sees a representation of gay men in the media, it probably carries the patriarchal contempt in it—these are often exaggerated, prejudicial, and certainly not erotic kinds of depictions.

In "Gender Treachery: Homophobia, Masculinity, and Threatened Identities," exploring the possible causes of homophobia, Patrick D. Hopkins says: "I find that one way to read homophobia and heterosexism in men is in terms of homosexuality's threat to masculinity, which in light of the connection between gender and personal identity translates into a threat to what constitutes a man's sense of self" (112-113). For homophobia Hopkins understands all "physical violence and strong verbal, economic, and juridical abuse against gays" (116).

According to the author, because we are "gendered subjects" with pre-established roles in society—even our "personhood" is a product of our gender identities (113)—we are not allowed to "betray" what was "naturally" given to us. Masculinity is seen as

something innate, natural, and healthy, and gay men thus become "gender traitors" once they violate "the [rules] of gender identity / gender performance" (114).

In Hopkins's opinion, homophobia and masculinity are closely related. Moreover, he says that heterosexism, i.e., the act of supporting heterosexuality, offers the necessary conditions for the existence of homophobia. He argues that heterosexism "is the backdrop of the binary division into heterosexual and homosexual (parasitic of the man/woman binary division), with, as usual, the first term of the binary good and the second term bad" (116). In heterosexist culture, a series of behaviors and concepts are created. Among these, the assumption that male subjects have to be competitive, violent, butch, and that they should prey women and despise gay men. This culture not only validates these behaviors but is in fact "culpable for the production of homophobia. Heterosexists are politically culpable for the production of homophobics" (116).

An interesting aspect in Hopkins's essay is that he questions masculinity not only in terms of its essence, the assumption that masculinity is a natural, normal, good, and essential identity, but also in terms of its performance. In fact, Hopkins believes that one of the greatest flaws in masculinity is exactly the conflict between essence and performance. Seeing masculinity as performance means that a man has to behave in a certain way that can signal and guarantee his male essence. Since an early age young boys are taught that they should adopt the right behavior to ensure this:

> But even though you just are a little *boy*, even though it's perfectly natural, you must make sure you do not act (how? why?) like a girl. You must make sure that you exhibit the right behavior for a boy (but isn't it natural?) ... Perform like a man. (119)

The satisfactory result of this performance ensures one's masculinity, as well as some rewards granted for the ones who perform well, such as "advantage in power, safety,

admiration, and self-esteem" (120). However, the conflicting nature of manhood is that although masculinity is seen as natural, essential, and innate, a man has to *stay* masculine. That means he should do whatever he can to prevent the loss of his masculinity, including an "incessant self-monitoring" (123), as well as a monitoring of others. Hopkins argues that "[i]n fact, although the stable performance of masculinity is presented as an *outcome* of being a man, what arises in looking at heterosexism / homophobia is that being a man, or continuing to be a man, is the *outcome* of performing masculinity" (124).

Picture 4 – The Performance of Masculinity

But how does this performance affect the creation of representations of gay men and their desire? Is it possible to find an impartial, not biased depiction of homosexuality in patriarchal mass media? If a great deal of masculinity concerns its constant maintenance and monitoring, then it becomes fairly improbable to find impartiality in such terms. Heterosexists are most likely to create and endorse partial, biased, and offensive representations of homosexuality once it is a threat to what they are desperately trying to maintain—their masculinity.

Moreover, because we are talking about heterosexist representations of homosexuality, eroticism tends to be absent, or even worse, it might be distorted and regarded as aberrant. In patriarchal society, gay sex is particularly seen as sick, perverted, unnatural. Hollywood movies such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *Gods and Monsters* are rich in depictions of sick, murderous gay men, and their "unnatural" sexuality is shown as part of their devious nature. Heterosexuality is, then, secured with these representations. As Hopkins points out, homophobia has its rewards—public approval and one's masculinity are secured when a "real" man jokes about "the homos." Performing masculinity requires the deployment of gay sexuality, and most representations in the media attest and validate homophobic practices.

Hence, it is only *natural* that the male-centered canon has influenced and inhibited enormously the circulation of gay literature in most literary circles. Reproof and retaliation are common to a gay man who, to quote Rich´s expression, dares to represent his sexuality in *his* own terms. In *Articulate Flesh*, arguing that in a society where love between men is regarded as something anomalous, monstrous that should not be expressed, Gregory Woods attests that even the simple act of speaking becomes "a violation of tact." From the moment a homosexual writer opens his mouth to speak, he is violating a tacit agreement: "to begin to speak is already to have said too much. It follows, therefore, that the literary expression of male love, however succinct, will invariably be considered excessive" (2). Because of that, gay literature has been repressed, marginalized to ghettos, and in many cases, deleted from the public. In patriarchal capitalist society, even pornography with a heterosexual content can have more respectability and access than the literary expression of gay men.

One of the best-known examples to illustrate the suppression of gay literature is the polemic around the reception of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in the second half of the

nineteenth century. What the facts show us is that Whitman's work has been the reason for many disputes in academic circles, including its censoring and editing, so that it could be "adapted" for the public's taste and the canon. It is also known by the public that around 1860 even Emerson attempted to convince Whitman to delete all passages in which sex was made explicit, specially the homoerotic ones. Whitman rejected the suggestion altogether, saying the organic wholeness of his book was fundamental to its understanding and appreciation.

From 1855 to 1881 Whitman's book would receive six new editions, all of them under Whitman's own supervision. However, Ed Folsom argues in "Leaves of Grass, Junior: Whitman's Compromise with Discriminating Tastes," that the book has, at the same time, received four volumes of selections in which all sexually explicit passages were strategically deleted, so that the public could have "a safe first encounter with Whitman" (641). According to Folsom, though Whitman did not edit these selections himself, he was compliant with their releasing—what, in Folsom's view, is a proof that Whitman was not only involved in the project, but also in contradiction (by force of circumstances) with his claims for nondiscrimination in artistic creation.

Regardless of whether Whitman took part in the "sanitizing process" of *Leaves of Grass* or not, this fact stands as a clear example of the censoring practices in homosexual erotic representations, especially in the past. Folsom himself claims that:

> our early textbooks performed a taming function on Whitman, wresting him into line with the sanctioned cultural narrative, often allowing him entry but ensuring that he would be read only in his most socially acceptable "O Captain!" form. Instead of viewing Whitman as disruptive, then, many textbooks simply edited him and silenced radical aspects of his work until he came to seem prudently conventional. (663)

However, the editing and censoring are not the only problems involving Whitman's work. In fact, his book is prolific in being involved in all sorts of controversies since its first publication. For example, the political implications for a given male critic who openly endorsed the homoerotic content in Whitman´s work during the first half of the Twentieth century. In his essay "The Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen's Whitman, Whitman's Matthiessen," Jay Grossman analyses not only how F. O. Matthiessen´s *American Renaissance* utterly ignores all evidences of homoeroticism in *Leaves of Grass*, but also the power structures of heterosexuality of which the critic had to conform in order to conceal his own sexuality and political position in the 1930s.

In the book, Matthiessen sets to discuss the importance of "the big five", i.e., Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville to American literature. What seems curious is the fact that Matthiessen does not mention anywhere in the book the word "Calamus" during his discussion on Whitman. For Grossman, the fact deserves investigation, especially because Matthiessen was a life-long left-wing political activist, socialist, and a homosexual himself. In his view, Matthiessen's double position exemplifies the way writers and critics had (they still have) to conform to the prevailing structures of heterosexuality:

> How shall we think through this absent word, which marks the absence in *American Renaissance* of any sustained discussion of Whitman's most overtly homoerotic lyrics, especially when considered in the light of another "fact" we "know" about Matthiessen, that he was himself "homosexual" and shared more than twenty years of his life with another man, the painter Russel Cheney? (799)

Because Matthiessen was inserted in a highly heterosexist milieu, it would be quite improbable for him to sustain and defend Whitman's homoerotic lyrics. For Grossman "much of the criticism surrounding Matthiessen ultimately overlooks the structures of

homophobia / heteronormativity within which he was imbedded" (802). Behind the prevailing cultural sites and material practices, there lay the "discursive structures" of heterosexism—structures that require conformity and obedience. If Matthiessen had been publicly supportive to Whitman´s homoeroticism, he would also be instantly compliant with Whitman´s "insufficient delicacy, his inadequate sense of what should be made visible and how and when it should be displayed—his chamber-pot in full view" (827).

As in the notion of masculinity provided by Hopkins, Matthiessen had to perform "like a man"—suppressing any traces of his personality and sexuality—the only acceptable role for a male critic at that time, and certainly the only way to have access to the publishing market. Homophobia is a threat to the lives of thousands of gay men, and sometimes the performance of masculinity can also be a shield against the physical and verbal aggression they might be exposed to, not to mention the impediment to work and to express themselves freely.

Woods highlights the fact that since homosexuality has been "driven underground" it had to assume many forms of *pseudonyms* in order to survive. It follows that "different groups and individuals adopted different solutions to the articulation of the unspeakable" (3). The life and work of Hart Crane, Woods says, is instructive to show the extremes such tactics of concealment might attain: "In order to conceal his sexuality, Crane hid relatively straightforward emotions under an ornate carapace of difficulty. Thereafter, he suffered a critical response which denied, or ignored, any contribution of his sexuality to his poetry" (3).

Matthiessen´s tactics of concealment invites us to think about the role of the critic in the XXI century. How should a critic position himself / herself in the face of this reality today? Woods might give an interesting if not provocative insight: "Should I, then, have

begun by saying `I am homosexual`? Or must I act out the strabismus of bisexuality? I could always, of course, ape the 'objectivity' of being straight" (3). Unfortunately, for many gay men the act of coming out still represents a serious threat. Precisely under which circumstances can a gay men step forward in full view today? Do queer theory and sexual politics really have an open space in academic circles now?

The questions involving the deletion of homoeroticism are complex and varied—among these the maintenance of masculinity, the discursive structures of heterosexuality and their demands, and the self-censoring tactics among gay men to evade from homophobia. One of the main concerns in feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer studies is the project of freeing eroticism from the strain of heterosexism, and in literature they find plenty of representations that can be used to challenge erotic and political domination.

Walt Whitman´s "Calamus" is a clear example of a cultural work that goes positively against the grain. Despite all controversies that surround his work, Whitman was bold enough to oppose a male centered society and its erotic practices founded in hierarchies and domination at a time in which this was unthinkable. Few times in the history of representations an author risked so much, and exposed himself so much, too.

The next chapter of this research discusses representations of male homosexual desire present in "Calamus," and investigates the impact of these representations in late nineteenth-century US. Ultimately, this is an attempt to question the very nature of erotic representations in Western societies, their total involvement in the creation of power-driven sexual / social relations, and their decisive role in the access of pleasure.

Chapter II

1- Whitman's *Adhesiveness*—Naming the Unspeakable

With the publication of *Democratic Vistas* in 1871, Whitman would consolidate his theory about the nature and the specifications of true American democracy. At the same time, he intended to categorize, and especially to name, a condition that still remained unacknowledged so far—the love relationships between men. The book, as Whitman had tackled in previous essays, focuses especially on democracy and the individual—the two key elements to his considerations about U.S. society and its future development. In his opinion, these two categories were not only closely related, but co-dependent. Out of the full acceptance of men's potentialities, including the sexual bonds between them, a real democratic nation could flourish.

Critics have often referred to *Democratic Vistas* as bitter, harsh, and disillusioned with American society. Carrying the disenchantment that followed the end of the Civil War, the book visibly differs from the optimism one finds in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Mark Van Doren, editor of the 1977 edition of *The Portable Whitman,* argues that the poet "has not lost his faith in the future, but the future is the only thing that gives him hope. Neither has he lost faith in his theory of democracy, which for him is still the theory of America" (315). For Van Doren, everything that Whitman could do was to imagine "a golden age to come," since the present moment struck him by its materialistic character and "hollowness of heart."

Whitman's idea of true democracy, an indispensable characteristic to oppose all hypocrisy, superciliousness, deceit, depravity, and corruption he detected in American

society, had obligatorily to be in consonance with what he named *adhesiveness*—a concept that has become emblematic of his thought, and an undeniable evidence of his historical relevance to the discussion of sexuality. For him, the future success of the US depended strongly in an "[i]ntense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man" (369). In one of the most quoted and analyzed passages of *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman argues that the introduction and acceptance of *adhesiveness* could restore the loss of spiritualization that was striking the nation. His aim was to search for

> the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature if not going beyond it), that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof (…) I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself. (369)

For many years people failed to grasp the meaning and the extension of what Whitman was proposing with the introduction of the term. In *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry*, investigating the origins of the word *adhesiveness*, Robert K. Martin argues that although Whitman borrowed the word from the language of phrenology—"the pseudoscience of reading the bumps of the head to determine the character"(34)—the term needs to be considered from the perspective of Whitman's own characterization.

According to Martin, Whitman borrowed the term from phrenology, but then attributed to it his own, particular meaning. In phrenology one has the categories adhesiveness and amativeness—"the propensity to friendship and the propensity to love"(34)—but it says nothing about the two contrasting kinds of love Whitman refers to. In an attempt to give a name to a condition that still remained unacknowledged, and also to differentiate two distinct kinds of erotic love, Whitman introduced the terms *adhesive love*

(homosexual love) and *amative love* (heterosexual love). For the first time in the history of the U.S., homosexuality received its own name and characterization, even if that name was a "poor and borrowed one." As Martin has said:

> his appropriation of the term "adhesiveness" was an essential part of the process of validating love between men. As he used it, it lost its phrenological associations and took on new ones; it evoked the qualities Whitman admired—loyalty, fidelity, sharing, touching. It was to be the new word of a new religion. (35)

Out of a word that designated friendship, Whitman introduced an innovative sexual meaning to create a term meant to authorize the existence of male homosexuals. Although *Democratic Vistas* appeared eleven years after the publication of "Calamus," Whitman's overtly homoerotic cluster of poems, its main ideas underlie most of the poems. Regardless of the fact that the word adhesiveness is mentioned only once in "Calamus," these love poems are impregnated by the idea that democracy and male sexual bonds are intrinsically related. Even before the publication of "Calamus," Whitman was using the word adhesiveness in his lyrics. In his 1856 poem "Song of the Open Road," for instance, the term is employed with the same connotation it has in *Democratic Vistas*. Adhesiveness is democracy's "twin," and "counterpart"—without the former, the later becomes "incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself."

However, some aspects of Whitman's coined terminology and thought leave plenty of room for questioning and debate. Though in *Democratic Vistas* he analyzes the situation of women and makes a call for the equality between the sexes, women are not included in the term adhesiveness, be it, as Martin says, "the friendship of a man for a woman or of a woman for another woman" (34). Whitman's reasons for this exclusion will never be fully determined—maybe they come from the fact that he was dealing with a very unstable

meaning in a very troubled period—but the fact that the poet of democracy has somehow left women outside America's determining factor to achieve a true democracy is still surprising. Whitman's contradictions might have compromised part of his theory about democracy, but they do not diminish the striking effect that "Calamus" has caused in American public opinion, and its importance as one of the most striking male homoerotic depictions to date.

2- "Calamus"—The Erotics of Defiance

The cluster of poems entitled "Calamus," a sequence of forty-five lyrics, was first seen in print on the third edition of Whitman´s *Leaves of Grass* in 1860. The name "Calamus," as explained by Vivian Pollak in *The Erotic Whitman,* is "a Greek-derived word the poet intended to signify both botanically and phallically" (127). According to Whitman himself in his *Correspondence*, the Calamus is a kind of grass characterized by its large size and hardness—the choice of the name hinting at Whitman´s eroticisation of nature as seen all over *Leaves of Grass*, and, especially in "Calamus," where nature is often associated with the male genitals. In this study, I have decided to discuss sixteen of the forty-five poems, those included in the 1977 edition of Mark Van Doren´s *The Portable Whitman*. This choice takes into consideration not only length constraints, but also Van Doren´s wide circulation in canonical circles. Yet, my selection is not free from the editing practices I myself criticize along this study (although here the reasons are far from being related to censorship or repression, but are rather a constriction due to practical matters).

It is known that the "Calamus" poems have widened, strengthened, and reinforced Whitman's previous representations of eroticism—to the already (homo)erotic *Leaves of Grass*, he introduced a frank, defying homoeroticism unprecedented in American literature.

Reading the poems, one has the sensation of reading a manifest, or a testimony—Whitman´s open statement about his homosexuality, the proclamation of an alternative way of life, and his full acceptance of it. Some of the poems suggest the poet´s awareness of the risk he was taking, and the price he would have to pay for stripping so shamelessly in verse. In "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me," for instance, Whitman clearly shows this perception:

> Here the frailest leaves of me and yet my strongest lasting,
> Here I shade and hide my thoughts, I myself do not
> expose them,
> And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.
> (200)[1]

Though he sees "Calamus" as his frailest effort, probably because of its controversial theme, he is aware of its strength and disruptive power, and obviously, of its lasting character. The play of irony between "frailest leaves" / "strongest lasting," and "shade and hide" / "expose" reveals this perception. In fact, even considering a certain encoding of homoeroticism in some lines of "Calamus," Whitman's openness on these verses has exposed him more than ever before. The words in the poem assume a quasi-human status, and they demand the poet to utter them, even at the expense of his exposure.

According to Martin, "Calamus" testifies Whitman´s self-recognition of his identity as a homosexual. More than this, Whitman's sexual identity must be seen as "the source of his art, the center of his book, and the foundation of his political theory" (51). The publication of "Calamus," then, indicates a radical change in historical consciousness: "the self-conscious awareness of homosexuality as an identity. "Calamus" is the heart of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as the root." It is the most poignant part of the book, and, in a sense, the

[1] This citation is taken from the 1977 edition of *The Portable Whitman*. All subsequent citations, including those from *Democratic Vistas* and "Song of Myself," pertain to the same edition. Only the page numbers will be supplied.

starting point to other erotic depictions that pervade the whole work. The perception of this same identity, which eleven years after the poet would theorize and defend so fiercely, is also the heart of *Democratic Vistas*.

Martin, nonetheless, calls attention to the risks of taking "Calamus" simply as Whitman´s autobiographical account. As he explains, the poems are "fictional, an artful arrangement of life in order to present oneself in a particular light" (52). Thus, he goes on, "Calamus" is not a description of real life events but "a dramatized version of Whitman´s acceptance of himself as a homosexual and his realization of the consequence of that acceptance" (52). The religious connotations of this acceptance are apparent. Martin describes Whitman´s embracing this new life and perception as a *conversion*—an almost spiritual state in which the old parameters have to be abandoned, and the risks taken. "Calamus" becomes the gospel of this new religion, and Whitman frequently assumes the persona of a revolutionary Messiah that teaches his disciples/lovers the new principles.

The standards of this new acquired perception, and the changes that come with them are immediately introduced in "In Paths Untrodden," the opening poem in "Calamus." Here, Whitman establishes the tone for the whole cluster as he vehemently decides to sing songs celebrating "male attachment." The poet portrays two worlds that cannot coexist—that of his sexuality and that of the spheres of public life—especially in puritan America:

> In paths untrodden,
> In the growth by margins of pond-waters,
> Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
> From all the standards hitherto publish´d, from the pleasures,
> profits, conformities,
> Which too long I was offering to feed my soul,
> Clear to me now standards not yet publish´d, clear to me
> that my soul,
> That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades,
> (188)

The metaphor of the paths untrodden seems to refer to a life the poet has never experienced fully before—his sexuality. The only way to improve this experience is by "escaping" a public dimension that is marked by negative connotations. Before this decision, the poet had to seek for compensations such as money or even compliance with social principles in order to feed his soul. Against the grain, he decides to break from the conventions of what has been already established. Interestingly, the "standards not yet publish´d" the poet refers to resonates the changes in historical consciousness provoked by the first publication of "Calamus" in 1860. Before "Calamus," Whitman has never advocated so openly male-male desire, but *now*—in the cosmos of the poem—this necessity has become pressing and clear. And it is in isolation that this new perception can come up:

> Here by myself away from the clank of the world,
> Tallying and talk´d to here by tongues aromatic,
> No longer abash´d, (for in this secluded spot I can
> respond as I would not dare elsewhere,)
> Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself,
> yet contains all the rest,
> (188)

If we think about the anxieties provoked by the feeling of solitude and isolation in our discontinuous existence Bataille has exhaustively described, we might come to an interesting paradox. Bataille says we are "discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity" (15). The individual in Whitman perishes amidst the clank of the world, surrounded by the noises and distractions of the city. It is precisely in isolation that the poet can recover his true self, and respond as he "would not dare elsewhere." Yet, isolation by

itself is not enough—it is by singing an eroticized, magnificent male body that he is able to find satisfaction.

Being immersed in a Puritan society, Whitman hints at the dangers that his adhesive nature could welcome if expressed freely in society. Nature—the secluded spot—becomes a place for freeing oneself from the constraints of men's sanctions and prohibitions. In *A History of Gay Literature—The Male Tradition*, Gregory Woods calls attention to the fact that the secluded spot may have a double implication. It can be a real space in nature where the speaker can celebrate "the need of comrades," but also "the site of the poem itself. The poem, that is to say, is a safe space, for all that is so manifestly public" (157). If in "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me" the poet hides and shades his thoughts, here the poem becomes a space for free expression. However, even if the poet is "protected" by his lyrics, the need for recognition will invariably expose him to the arenas of public life. The city with its multitudes and democracy Whitman so joyfully sings in *Leaves of Grass* is also a constant source of anguish and frustration.

For Pollak, a significant aspect in "Calamus" is the fact that Whitman identifies isolation and loneliness with the city, and not with the wilderness. Hence, one finds all over the sequence the "frightening, unbounded solitude Whitman tends to associate with urban rather than with rural life" (136). In the isolation provided by nature, the poet becomes fulfilled and is addressed by "tongues aromatic"—both a religious and an erotic reference. In Martin's perception, the tongues in the poem, "the Pentecostal voices, merge with the reeds of calamus and hence with the male genitals" (55). Religion, nature, and the erotic—all three overlap to characterize the life that "contains all the rest." It is precisely in this atmosphere that homoeroticism is freed from all constraints:

Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly

attachment
Projecting them along that substantial life,
Bequeathing hence types of athletic love,
Afternoon this delicious Ninth-month in my forty-first year,
I proceed for all who are or have been young men,
To tell the secret of my nights and days,
To celebrate the need of comrades.
(188)

Desire, personal satisfaction, and an erotic contemplation of nature, which is an ally, all come from the unreserved reliance on manly love. The exuberance of adjectives used to describe this new perception characterized by male attachment—substantial, athletic, delicious—contrast with the dullness of civil life in the city on the first lines. Nonetheless, there is no reference to an actual sexual experience with any of the young men the poet is singing. Rather, as he goes to this secluded spot, he celebrates and sings "all who are or have been young men." Youth is the time of sexual fervor, and also a time for idealism, enthusiasm, and boldness. Secrets are told as the poet abandons his former, unsatisfied civic persona. His conversion becomes a celebration of "the need of comrades."

Yet, the question of space remains a problematic aspect all over the "Calamus" sequence. In most poems Whitman associates personal dissatisfaction and frustration with an urban setting, and the speakers in his poems only attain their balance and happiness when isolated in nature. For Woods, the question of space is even more complex in Whitman than we might presume: "That open spaces are used as closets is a deeply disruptive trope throughout *Leaves of Grass*" (157). Contrary to our notion of the closet—the confinement of homosexual identity to closed, restricted regions of society—the subject in most of the "Calamus" poems flees to the loneliness of natural open spaces to escape

from social conventions. Once there, in the uncontrolled natural world, he is able to feel "no longer abash'd."

This movement of the subject towards open spaces, often verified in the "Calamus" sequence, may not necessarily mean a refusal to participate in the social, political life. Later on, in *Democratic Vistas,* Whitman would expand the intrinsic relation between democracy and homosexuality—the acceptance and incorporation of manly love in the public arenas is seen not only as necessary, but essential for the actual implantation of a truly democratic society. For Whitman, the traits of heterosexual culture that served as basis for nineteenth-century American democracy—profit, competition, intolerance, war—should be replaced by the democratic establishment of a fervid comradeship. Nature provides the necessary balance, and sometimes chaos, to oppose men's skepticism and greediness. In a sense, it is just expected that the subject in "Calamus" might flee to nature.

In "The Canon in the Closet," Jay Grossman argues that the "Calamus" sequence "steadfastly refuses to continue to some isolated space apart from the multivalent consequences of relationships between men" (808). In his view, Whitman's most important feat was to remove the debate about sexuality from the realm of familial bonds and the private to place it within public and political spheres. "Calamus" vigorously "signals its difference from modern identitarian dispensations by alternately taking as its subject the love relationships between men and the political relationships between 'states,' and by insistently describing, conceptualizing, and allegorizing each in terms of the other" (808).

Nonetheless, Whitman's equation of adhesiveness with democracy—their total co-dependence to the full achievement of a fairer society—is still put to test in "In Paths Untrodden," and maybe in other poems of the sequence as well. If on the last lines of the poem Whitman proclaims a new republic where the love of comrades would encompass

everything, he, at the same time, delimits male homoerotic behavior *as masculine*. The men involved in these attachments are manly, athletic, young—homosexuality is democratic, and worth of celebration, as long as it is masculine. Contradictorily, in many passages of the "Calamus" sequence Whitman associates male homosexuality with characteristics that are not so *manly*—frequently we see along the poems men holding hands while contemplating nature, suffering because of rejection, or holding in each other's arms in a tender, delicate manner. The dominant, competitive, hierarchical character of mainstream heterosexual eroticism is abandoned in favor of a much more complex model.

Because Whitman was, in a sense, pioneer in the task of "modernizing" manly love, he possibly had to rely on manliness to imbue his fervid comradeship with a heroic, strong character (the same pattern one sees in the classics). In Plato's *Symposium,* for instance, both partners had to display the right behavior in their love relation—a position in society for the younger partner, and his future status as a man, depended on that. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault demonstrates how the love of boys "defined a whole set of conventional and appropriate behaviors, making this relation a culturally and morally overloaded domain." All erotic practices involving the love of boys aimed at a "behavior and the respective strategies that both partners should observe in order to give their relations a 'beautiful' form; that is, one that was aesthetically and morally valuable"(196). Not that Whitman was interested in morals or conventions, nor does one find the same unbalanced erotic relations in his poetry—but the classics seem to have left their mark in his poetic creation and characterization of adhesive love.

The male body, including Whitman's own body, becomes emblematic of the vigorous, brave tradition he recreates. This body turns into an extension of the landscape,

plants, and natural cycles of death and rebirth—they fuse and overlap in an endless process of regeneration and erotic arousal. As Woods states, "Whitman's version of pastoral is often associated with the male body" (157). Contrary to patriarchal continuous association of the female body with nature, Whitman subverts this very model by using the male body to portray nature, and vice-versa. In "Scented Herbage of My Breast" the vitality and restoration of the male body necessarily has to follow the cycles of nature. Just as in nature plants and flowers blossom in spring, the body and its desires shall re-emerge once again:

> Scented herbage of my breast,
> Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best
> afterwards,
> Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,
> Perennial roots, tall leaves, O winter shall not freeze
> you delicate leaves,
> Every year shall you bloom again, out from where you
> retired you shall emerge again;
> (189-190)

The strength of the poet's desire for renovation is the same strength of the brand new leaves that defy death whenever they bloom again. His necessity for writing—"I write, to be perused best"—is also an attempt at continuation, and self-expression. Additionally, the line points to Whitman's own desire to be read in detail, to be fully examined, scrutinized. Even the passage of time, and death cannot prevent the continuous renovation of his will. The male body is the site where nature springs forth. The growing leaves, as with the calamus symbol that names the sequence, suggest a phallic connotation. And just as the leaves that "bloom again" every year, the desire represented by the phallus shall be continuously renewed, too. According to Martin, the "phallic and the vegetative, as in mythology, are intricately woven together throughout this poem" (59). However, the same continuous desire might be the cause of anguish and uncertainty for the poet:

……..
O slender leaves! O blossoms of my blood! I permit you
to tell in your own way of the heart that is under you,
O I do not know what you mean there underneath
yourselves, you are not happiness,
You are often more bitter than I can bear, you burn
and sting me,
Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged roots,
you make me think of death,
(189)

It is the poet the one to allow the leaves—his deepest secret—to express without restrictions the nature of his desires. As in "In Paths Untrodden," where he proceeds to tell the secret of his nights and days, here the leaves—the blossoms of his blood—will convey his genuine self. The acceptance of the truth under the leaves does not come without surprise and consternation. The meaning they convey is unknown, and it does not bring happiness. The desire underneath torments him as it burns, stings, and causes pain. As Martin points out, these lines are often "cited as examples of Whitman's guilt-ridden nature. Yet they comprise only two lines out of forty-one" (60). Nonetheless, the optimistic statement that immediately follows the tormented lines—"Yet you are beautiful to me"—alters the message in a positive way.

Giving the context where the poet was writing, the complete lack of parameters to cope with his homosexual nature, the doubts he experiences are not surprising. But beauty can still be found in the middle of uncertainty and pain, even if it comes from "faint tinged roots." The fact that his desire, and the impossibility of its accomplishment, reminds him of death would, once again, not be foreign to the erotic activity. As Martin says "desire in itself is painful since unfulfilled, yet the fulfillment of desire brings death and the absence of desire" (60). Death is an inevitable stage in the endless cycles of nature and desire, but

love is the element that amends these experiences. Love seems to bring a kind of unexpected tranquility in the face of death:

> ……..
> Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally
> beautiful except death and love?)
> O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant
> of lovers, I think it must be for death,
> For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the
> atmosphere of lovers,
> Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines
> to prefer,
> I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes
> death most,)
> (189)

Two things are beautiful to the poet: death and love. More than this, death is beautiful *from* the perspective of love. For Bataille eroticism is, at the same time, an overabundance of life and a longing for death. The principle of continuity, which we so desperately seek throughout life, links death and eroticism—ultimately, these are the two experiences in which we escape from our limited, finite existence. The poet, knowing the aspects that strangely link love with death, approaches death with a calm, solemn mind. This relative peacefulness makes him decline the choice of either life or death: they are indifferent to him. Even in doubt, he suspects that "the high soul of lovers welcomes death most." The high soul of lovers, in the abandonment of their erotic rapture, metaphorically welcomes the infinite surrender to death.

In lines 29 to 39, the poet compares the leaves—the power of his will—with death. Just as in nature death always brings rebirth, he summons the leaves to grow up from his breast, thus bringing renovation: "Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! Grow up out of / my breast! / Spring away from the conceal'd heart there!" The poet refuses the concealment he has been forced to live up to this point. The leaves shall not "remain down

there so ashamed, herbage of my breast!" Now he is "determin'd to unbare this broad breast of [his, he has] long enough stifled and choked." Again, as in "In Paths Untrodden," the poet rejects a life he has been forced to live, and the appearances of conventions:

> …….
> Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you,
> now you serve me not,
> I will say what I have to say by itself,
> I will sound myself and comrades only, I will never
> again utter a call only their call,
> I will raise with immortal reverberations through the
> States,
> (190)

The metaphor of the leaves that has been dominating the poem up to this moment is abandoned—the plain truth has to be said "by itself." The poet's determination is to proclaim *his* truth, a compromise to utter from now on only the song of comrades. As a master, he assumes the task of giving "an example to lovers to take permanent shape," an example that is to be heard throughout the States. The final section of the poem is dedicated entirely to death. In fact, he proclaims that only death and love are important, the rest is a mere "mask of materials." In the poet's view, death hides beneath everything, and sooner or later death—"the real reality"—shall expose the falseness of social conventions. Death shall "dissipate this entire show of appearance"—"show of appearances" as the opposite of the truth he has found amidst his comrades.

Whitman's program of creating a community of comrades continues in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand." This project, as Whitman states throughout the "Calamus" sequence, will be one of difficulty, complete change, and abnegation: "[y]ou would have to give up all else." Not everybody is able to comprehend the poet's proposition. The poem makes clear that one has to possess *one thing*—a special

prerequisite, most possibly the understanding of true adhesive nature—to grasp his meaning, and to become his follower. The reader is warned not to believe in appearances, nor even in his own judgment. The poet escapes definitions, he declares to be far different from what one might suppose. The reader is given the opportunity to become his follower, and lover, provided that he has that special knowledge required previously:

> Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
> Without one thing all will be useless,
> I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
> I am not what you supposed, but far different.
>
> Who is he that would become my follower?
> Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?
> (191)

The reader is constantly addressed in the poem—the poet warns, questions, and tests the possible candidates to his affections. As Martin has suggested, Whitman frequently makes use of religious connotations in "Calamus." Manly love (or adhesiveness) is the new gospel to be taught, the readers are the possible disciples, and he—the poet of comrades—often assumes the persona of a kind of Christ. As with the gospel in the Bible, the path for those who decide to follow him will be difficult, exhausting, time consuming:

> The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps
> destructive,
> You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect
> to be your sole and exclusive standard,
> Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,
> The whole past theory of your life and all the conformity to the
> lives around would have to be abandon'd,
> Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any
> further, let go your hand from my shoulders,
> Put me down and depart on your way.
> (191)

Despite the fact that the gospel he preaches is founded in the love of comrades, the result, because not comprehended, might be destructive. From the start the reader is warned of the hardship to be faced. As in religious apprenticeship, the standards of one's previous life, the mundane activities, have to be abandoned for good. The poet becomes one's "sole and exclusive standard"—just as Christ becomes the only model during a disciple initiation. The principle is to abandon the conformity of habitual, ordinary existence, and repudiate a life of dull convictions and comfort. Once again, as Christ has done in his teachings, the poet confers to the reader the free will of choosing his way. Before "troubling [himself] any further" the reader is advised to release the speaker, to "put [him] down"—a clear reference to the act of reading *Leaves of Grass*.

The next stanza announces the meeting between poet and reader. This hypothetical meeting has in the open spaces—a wood, rock, or the sea—not only a setting for the action, but also an ally, a facilitator. The gospel he preaches cannot be openly taught in the public spheres, at least not among those who lack that special requirement, that special attitude and understanding. This new association has to be sealed away from men's society:

> Or else by stealth in some wood for trial,
> Or back of a rock in the open air,
> (For in any roof'd room or house I emerge not, nor in company,
> And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
> But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching lest any person for miles around approaches unawares,
> Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the bench of the sea or some quiet island,
> Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
> With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,
> For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.
> (191)

As in other poems, the open spaces work as closets, a place of safety against intolerance. The poet is not allowed to appear in "any roof'd room or house," or even to have company. Whenever in a public space, such as a library, he becomes "dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead"—among society he turns out to be an outcast. In the open spaces, though, and in company of a possible candidate for his affections—the reader—the poet can permit one to kiss him with no hurry. The kiss is both the long-dwelling kiss of comrades and the kiss of a "new husband." The poet is, by the same token, the new husband and the comrade—like Christ, he is the beginning of a new religion, and the only path to follow.

This is the most problematic sequence of the poem, for one senses here traces of Whitman's guilt-ridden nature again. The paradox is clear. For Grossman, the "Calamus" poems refuse to "continue to some isolated space" away from the multiple consequences of public life. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman equates adhesiveness with democracy—they interfere, alter, and depend on each other. But how can adhesiveness intervene in public life if it has to be hidden in the woods? The only way the poet can kiss his comrade is fleeing to an isolated island?

For Woods, Whitman's strategy of addressing the reader, partly from his insistence that his own flesh is present among the pages of his book, becomes sometimes quite problematical. Whitman's strategy is "intrusive—particularly, I guess, to women readers—and even imperialistic. He is intent on colonizing the reader, body and soul, without prior consultation." Woods also questions Whitman's intention to establish a close intimacy with the reader; for the intimacy he offers is one of "anonymous sex. Contact is established—

and that is enough" (157). In the end, Whitman's claims for democracy, and the perfect society of comrades he proposes, seems to be circumscribed to few.

Moreover, Woods argues that Whitman seems strikingly presumptuous when in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" he addresses his unknown reader as his "comrade or wife." The kiss, though tender and erotic, cannot but evoke a feeling of control, of a privilege that is being conceded in a special situation, away from the public spheres. For Woods, the "openness of nature is invoked as a closed, private space—even a guilt-ridden one. The reader is thus inveigled into an uncomfortable conspiracy of kisses which ill accords with the avowal of openness which occurs in virtually all of the poems" (157). In fact, a "conspiracy of kisses" seems not to be the best definition here as the reader has been given a choice previously—one *has* the chance to decide whether to accept the poet's offer or not. Freewill seems to be the key word in the poem.

The conflicting views of these two critics, Grossman and Woods, can be an effective illustration of Whitman's power of disruption, and his talent for escaping definitions. Due to the autobiographical character of "Calamus," Whitman's private story, especially his contradictions as a man living under heavy pressure because of his complete unconventionality, is often brought to his poems. However, in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" he already warns the reader: "I will certainly elude you, / Even while you should think you had unquestionably / caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you." Just like a magician, a Harry Houdini of poetry, he has the ability to vanish in front of the reader, at the least the ones unable to hit "that which I hinted at; / Therefore release me and depart on your way."

In "For You O Democracy," Whitman maintains his project of creating a community of comrades based in the association of democracy and manly love. The poem, however, differs in the sense that manly love this time occupies all spaces in the American continent, including cities, and not only the refugee of open spaces. The love of comrades is the element that will hold the entire continent together:

> Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
> I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
> I will make divine magnetic fields,
> With the love of comrades,
> With the life-long love of comrades,
> (192)

As the poet and architect of manly love, he is the one to institute this new race of people that will inhabit an almost mythical promised land. The love of comrades is the source and energy of all creation. With the love of comrades, the speaker will "plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America"—the poet sets to rearrange the whole American continent, relying exclusively in the energy that comes from manly love. In this new legendary land, there will be no more space for shame or secrets:

> ……..
> I will make inseparable cities with their arms about
> each other's necks,
> By the love of comrades,
> By the manly love of comrades.
>
> For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you
> ma femme!
> For you, for you I am trilling these songs.
> (193)

The comrades are allowed to walk freely in these indivisible cities with "their arms about each other's necks." Already in 1860, Whitman was touching a highly controversial theme—the right to public displays of affection between same sex couples. The subject is

dealt obliquely through the creation of a mythological land where homosexual couples can share their fondness with no restrictions. And as in previous poems, this land is inhabited solely by "the manly love of comrades." There is no mention of friendship or love between women in these lands. Ironically, the only female presence in the poem is democracy itself—democracy is a "femme" the poet serves obediently, even erotically. All his songs of manly love are dedicated to democracy, which becomes an end in itself.

In "These I Singing in Spring," a poem that is set in motion, the poet goes on with his pilgrimage amidst his comrades. The poem describes the wanderings of the poet who, while dislocating in space to go deeper within the forest, meets his closest friends, including the spirits of the dead ones. This is the poem where Whitman entitles himself as "the poet of comrades," the first to deliberately sing manly love, and the first to propose a political project based on it. As such, he can understand as no one the sorrows and joys experienced by lovers:

> These I singing in spring collect for lovers,
> (For who but I should understand lovers and all their
> sorrow and joy?
> And who but I should be the poet of comrades?)
> (193)

The nature of his desire, and the difficulty to fulfill it, bestows him with an understanding that goes beyond all other poets. The body of poems that compose "Calamus," their uniformity in establishing comradeship as a true political project to transform the destiny of America, would justify the poet's self-proclamation. According to Martin, "with the exception of *Moby-Dick* there was in the 1850s no literary tradition of homosexuality in America available to him" (54). Thus, Whitman—who is still often considered excessively self-praising for some—could possibly be right in considering

himself as the first to sing homosexual love so explicitly in poetry, at least within American literary tradition.

The poet assumes again the persona of a master, or an entity endowed with the powers of love and regeneration. His wanderings pass from the garden to the pond-side, and then the forest. Surrounded by the wildest nature the poet shall meet his friends, and find the perfect symbol to represent the love of comrades:

> …….
> Far, far in the forest, or sauntering later in summer,
> before I think where to go,
> Solitary, smelling the earthly smell, stopping now
> and then in silence,
> Alone I had thought, yet soon a troop gathers around me,
> Some walk by my side and some behind, and some
> embrace my arms and neck,
> They are the spirit of dear friends dead or alive, thicker
> they come, a great crowd, and I in the middle,
> (193-194)

The scene evokes a fantastic realm in the forest, a dream-like place where fabulous beings, a fraternity of comrades, dwell among the woods. In Martin's view, the passage from the garden to the forest is the passage "from domesticity into the more primitive, less regulated world of Pan" (65). In this uncontrolled world of the forest, the poet is greeted by the spirit of friends dead or alive—all who have experienced and shared the love of comrades. It is remarkable that Whitman creates a special locus where his comrades can live and love without restrictions. There is no mentioning in mythology of a similar place where only men could live together in an exclusive male fraternity. In Lesbos, only women could inhabit this remote, fantastic island. They were warriors, poets, and lovers—but no man was allowed. Whitman appropriates the classical tradition to build a place where only homosexual men can dwell.

Standing in the middle of this crowd, and sharing the renewing powers of spring, the poet distributes the gifts of nature and love for his equals: "Plucking something for tokens, tossing toward whoever / is near me,/ Here, lilac, with a branch of pine / Here, out of my pocket, some moss which I pull'd off / a live-oak in Florida as it hung trailing down." The live-oak with moss is the same that in "I saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" is used as a token for manly love. The passing around of nature's gift to the crowd assumes the status of a ritual of communion, a ceremony to consecrate manly love. But it is near the pond-side the place where the poet shall find the definitive token to symbolize the blessings of comradeship:

> ……...
> And here what I now draw from water, wading
> in the pond-side,
> (O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me, and returns
> again never to separate from me,
> And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of
> comrades, this calamus-root shall,
> Interchange it youths with each other! let none render
> it back!)
> (194)

It is precisely in the same place where the poet saw for the last time the one that "tenderly loves [him]" that he finds the definitive token of manly love. The calamus root is the perfect token once it is closely connected with the poet's beloved, and with the place where both had their last encounter. The youths surrounding the poet shall interchange it with each other—just like the bread passed around in Christ's Last Supper—as a way to celebrate and share their fraternity, their belonging.

The relevance of the calamus as a symbol, as Martin has stated, is the fact that it is "specifically sexual, that has its origins in personal experience, and that has broad consequences for the poet's life and art" (66). Being the perfect symbol of manly love, the

poet decides to reserve it for those who, just as in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," have that special understanding and appreciation: "But what I drew from the water by the pond-side, that / I reserve, / I will give of it, but only to them that love as I myself am capable of loving." Loving would assume a multiple meaning here—it is not only manly and sexual love, but also unconditional, unrestricted love.

The same kind of love is the basis of the poem "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances." Love here is not the answer and solution for all the metaphysical questions in the universe, but in the face of such intense feeling, these questions cease to be important. The poet introduces a series of doubts and uncertainties that delude us, and cause suffering, exposing the fragility of our provisional and hesitant theories about the universe:

> ……..
> That may-be reliance and hope are but speculations
> after all,
> That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful
> fable only,
> May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men,
> hills, shining and flowing waters,
> The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms, may-be
> these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions,
> and the real something has yet to be known,
> (195)

What becomes evident in the course of these philosophical considerations is the deficiency of men's convictions. Reliance and hope might be "speculations after all"—there is no certainty in this world. Even the question of life after death, one of the major concerns in religious thought, is discredited as a possible "beautiful fable only." The physical world as we perceive it—animals, men, landscape—are unquestionably regarded as "only apparitions." For the poet, the "real something," the real essence of things, has not

yet been perceived by men, it "has yet to be known." The objects and meanings we perceive are no more than misapprehensions of the real.

The world itself, the appearance of things, frequently defy us in our certainties. The poet recognizes the fact: "How often they dart out of themselves as if to / confound and mock me!" The more he thinks about these questions, the less he knows about them—the world is not what it appears to be, and so our convictions are but mere suppositions. The poet, however, is happy to disregard all these metaphysical questions in favor of something much more pleasurable:

> …….
> To me these and the like of these are curiously answer'd
> by my lovers, my dear friends
> When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long
> while holding me by the hand,
> When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words
> and reason hold not, surround us and pervade us,
> Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom,
> I am silent, I require nothing further,
> I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of
> identity beyond the grave,
> But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,
> He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me.
> (195)

The poet seems surprised and delighted that "curiously" his friends and lovers can answer all the great questions he has been considering so far. The simple act of holding his lover's hand, or sitting beside him is capable of satisfying him completely. The "impalpable," what cannot be expressed through words and reason, is ironically manifested by the "untold and untellable wisdom" of physical intimacy. The holding of his hand makes him indifferent to metaphysical questions, the contentment and satisfaction of love dissolves all the rest.

For Martin, Whitman could be suggesting "that such intellectual riddles have meaning only for those who lack satisfaction, that a concern for the next world betrays a certain unconcern for this one" (67). The idea is really implicit throughout "Calamus"—not only metaphysical inquiries are disregarded as irrelevant, but also money and fame. The proximity of the loved one, the moments of affectionate sexual intimacy outshine worldly preoccupations. The poem is filled with a tender, delicate eroticism—the image of the two lovers holding hands while traveling, sitting together evokes us a bucolic tranquility, one that takes no notice of mundane satisfactions.

The theme of the appearance of the outside world is also present in "Recorders Ages Hence"—as in the previous poem, the poet distrusts the delusions of appearances, and proposes his readers to penetrate in a more receptive, intense level of consciousness. Whitman's aim is to instruct future "recorders" what to say about him in ages to come. As a guide who presents to his listener important details, the poet takes the reader into a journey outside the conventional exterior of things. The surface of the world is disregarded as the poet proposes a journey "down underneath," a journey to the deepest levels of significance:

> Recorders ages hence,
> Come, I will take you down underneath this impassive
> exterior, I will tell you what to say of me,
> Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the
> tenderest lover,
> The friend the lover's portrait, of whom his friend
> his lover was fondest
> Who was not proud of his songs, but of the measureless
> ocean of love within him, and freely pour'd it forth,
> (195-196)

The exterior world is described as "impassive"—change does not happen by itself, the structures of the world have been previously established, therefore men must be the agents if change is to happen. The poet wants to be remembered as "the tenderest lover,"

the one his lover kept in a portrait with adoration, and the one with infinite love to be shared. Moreover, the poet announces he is not proud of his songs, but of this capacity for unlimited love. Nevertheless, Whitman's apparent humbleness could be disguising his excessive preoccupation about the way people might see him in the future. The readymade picture he wants to convey also might hint at a certain authority performed over his critics. He wants to be remembered in the future, but in the way he has established in advance.

The following lines of the poem all begin by the introduction of the relative "Who," or "Whose," as the poet continues to describe the way he wants to be remembered. The image of the two comrades walking hand in hand in the fields is again present, suggesting that the moment of love he has shared with his lover is always kept as the ideal, the most joyful in his life. However, this is here threatened by a terror that his lover, the one he adores most, might be indifferent to him. Rejection becomes a shadow capable of destabilizing the quiet, peaceful image—the same we have in "Of the Terrible Doubts of Appearances"—the poet has accomplished through love. The ideal of life, the sharing of real love with someone, is responsible for the poet's happiest moments. The poet is the one:

> Who often walk'd lonesome walks thinking of his dear
> friends, and lovers
> Who pensive away from the one he lov'd often lay sleepless
> and dissatisfied at night,
> Who knew too well the sick, sick dread lest the one he
> lov'd might secretly be indifferent to him,
> Whose happiest days were far away through fields, in
> woods, on hills, he and another wandering hand
> in hand, they twain apart other men,
> Who oft as he saunter'd the streets curv'd with his
> arm the shoulder of his friend, while the arm of his
> friend rested upon him also.
> (196)

The lonesome walk through fields this time brings to the poet's mind the absence of his friends, and lovers. Alone he is imperfect, incomplete. Deep in his thoughts, all through

sleepless nights, the poet aches for the lack of his lover. The risk of rejection torments him with a "sick, sick dread." As he faces the possibility of being denied the redemption from the external, empty world of appearances, he feels desolate. As Bataille continuously reminds us, the awareness of our finite, discontinuous nature is an infinite cause of anguish, desolation. The poet has a "measureless ocean of love within him," but the fact is not enough to secure his lover's receptiveness. Continuity is not accomplished as one of the parts has failed to respond positively.

The image of the speaker's "happiest days," when he and his lover used to walk hand in hand in the fields, woods, and hills is kept as a frozen moment of perfection that is gone. Likewise, even striding apart from other men, they can also be seen cheerfully walking in each other's arms on the streets. Even within the city, however, they differ from the conventionality of other men in their loving companionship, although they are not seen holding hands in a public space. The scene seems to trigger in our imagination the properties of a movie sequence. Besides, the image of these two men who hold each other happily on the street, their intimacy and spontaneity, becomes a powerful image of an ideal naturalness that this kind of love surely lacked. Maybe this is the image Whitman wanted to create, and the way he would like to be seen in the future—in the frozen moment of perfect understanding, absolute intimacy with his comrade, his lover. The meanness of the external world, at this precise moment, has been withdrawn.

The juxtaposition of these two realities—the external world, and the idealism of love and sexual intimacy—is yet again explored in "When I Heard at the Close of the Day." Fame, and material possessions are not capable of satisfying the poet, not even the accomplishment of practical objectives. The capitalist logic of accumulation and glories that come from ownership is dismissed as purposeless, empty. The repetition of the

sentence "I was not happy" reinforces the poet's dissatisfaction with a way of life based on efficiency and profit. As the poet draws to nature, and especially to the proximity of his lover, the mood of the poem starts to change considerably. From this point on, even the simple daily activities such as waking up in the morning, breathing, and bathing are pervaded by an intense joy:

> When I heard at the close of the day how my name
> had been receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol, still it was
> not a happy night for me that follow'd,
> And else when I carous'd, or when my plans were
> accomplish'd still I was not happy,
> But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of
> perfect health, refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe
> breath of autumn,
> When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and
> disappear in the morning light,
> When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing
> bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and saw
> the sunrise,
> And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was
> on his way coming, O then I was happy,
> (196-197)

It is by refusing to partake in conventional, bureaucratic life that the poet finds satisfaction. As Martin has called attention, Whitman's strategy marks a strong rejection of "the usual masculine standards of success. Fame (…) is nothing compared to the immediate and sensual pleasures of love and companionship" (70). In his rejection of the masculine standards of power and sexuality—namely, competition, profit, authority, hierarchy, and domination—Whitman has succeeded, at least in his lyrics, in creating the political project of comradeship (contradictorily, with the almost exemption of women). The norms of a profitable society cannot be applied to the realm of the senses and the soul:

> O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food
> nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day passe'd well,
> And the next came with equal joy, and with the
> next at evening came my friend,

> And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll
> slowly continually up the shores,
> I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sand as
> directed to me whispering to congratulate me,
> For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same
> cover in the cool night,
> In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was
> inclined toward me,
> And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night
> I was happy.
> (197)

As his lover approaches, the poet's days are filled with the purest joy. Nature conspires for their meeting, and even the ocean congratulates the couple in their sleep. A subtle, delicate eroticism pervades all the passage. The sequence is not marked by the excitement of sex, but rather it seems to capture the affection of the couple right after sex. It is the eroticism of deep intimacy and empathy, an eroticism that goes beyond, as Rich would say, the exclusiveness of the body. Woods argues that Whitman's dismissal of public honors "is rather a grand gesture," but the highest point of the poem is the move away from the public arena into a cozy, warm intimacy. For Woods "it is here that, contrary to Camille Paglia, by shifting the locus of the poem from capitol to bed, Whitman most convincingly swerves *towards* intimacy." Consequently, in its dismissal of formalities and public honors in favor of sexual intimacy and affection the poem "fires a shot across the bows of interventive politicians" (157). Indirectly, Whitman has offered a strong critique on the principles that dictated the social organization he would vehemently condemn some years later in *Democratic Vistas*.

In "Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone" the transforming presence of love is once again associated with the power of regeneration. Nonetheless, here Whitman compares love to a plant in its necessity for the sun and water to grow up and flourish. As the first line of the poem declares, "[r]oots and leaves themselves are these"—love by itself is but a

conceptual feeling. In order to develop, the seed of love needs to be cultivated, encouraged. It is precisely here, just as in many of the "Calamus" poems, that the active presence of the reader is required. Martin believes it is Whitman's readers the ones "who can turn the potential of his love-offering into reality. To speak of the possibility of homosexual love is to propose a first timid bud of March; whether that bud will bloom depends upon the reception it finds" (71).

Hence, the readers are the ones to fill the gaps in Whitman's work. As Martin says, the readers "are not asked to be passive admirers but to become gardeners of love, watering, feeding, and providing warmth" (71), so that the poet's work might be completed. As the poem suggests, one may be faced with the promise of love, but s/he has to be receptive otherwise the offer is in vain:

> ……
> Love-buds put before you and within you whoever
> you are,
> Buds to be unfolded on the old terms,
> If you bring the warmth of the sun to them they will
> open and bring form, color, perfume, to you,
> If you become the aliment and the wet they will become
> flowers, fruits, tall branches and trees.
> (197-198)

The buds of love ought to be "unfolded in the old terms"—possibly a reference to the classical model of love relationships involving exclusively the presence of men, as seen in Plato's *Symposium*, but also a suggestion that modern American society, in its emphasis on profit and power, had unlearned how to love. The readers are asked to be "the aliment and the wet" of love, and the heart is the soil where the seed might germinate.

The opposition between two contrasting worlds is also explored in "Of Him I Love Day and Night." Whitman uses a new religious metaphor to expose the world of appearances he so fiercely criticizes. The dream of searching for his lover's body reenacts

the hours that followed the crucifixion of Christ. As in the Biblical narrative, he searches for the body of his lover, but cannot find it anywhere. Therefore, the poet is not able to acknowledge loss in the material, physical sense. The sense of loss will haunt him everywhere—the endless enactment of loss transforms "every" place in a "burial" place:

> Of him I love day and night I dream'd I heard he was dead,
> And I dream'd I went where they had buried him
> I love, but he was not in that place,
> And I dream'd I wander'd searching among burial-places
> to find him,
> And I found that every place was a burial place;
> (198)

The metaphor also suggests that every place in which people are not capable of loving, situations in which life is spared with the trivialities of the material world, becomes a burial place, and people are unaware of the living death they are living with: "The houses full of life were equally full of death, (this house is now), / The streets, the shipping, the places of amusement, the Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, the Mannahatta, were / as full of the dead as of the living." The poet's decision is to break away from this obtuse life for he is capable of seeing the multitude of dead people obliviously walking. In order to do that, he has to be "willing to disregard burial-places and / dispense with them." If death is everywhere, why should we create specific places to lodge it? The poet finishes with an indifferent gaze at the rituals of death—they are of no use to him:

> ……
> And if the memorials of the dead were put up indifferently
> everywhere, even in the room where I eat or sleep,
> I should be satisfied,
> And if the corpse of any one I love, or if my own corpse,
> be dully render'd to powder and pour'd in the sea,
> I shall be satisfied,
> Or if it be distributed to the winds I shall be satisfied.
> (198)

Whitman suggests that, in the end, these rituals and memorials of the dead are insignificant. If one has lived a life of appearances, unable to love and celebrate life, then what happens after death, especially in its rituals, are just formalities. For Martin, in his acceptance of cremation and the dispersion of his ashes on the sea Whitman "thus rejects Christian superstitions about death and burial practices which reflect a deep fear of death" (73). The poet's full acceptance of love, and his firm intent in dissociating himself from this life of shallow surfaces has made him accept death—the end of mortal life—as inherent to existence.

In fact, what Whitman seems unable to endure—the reason of his worst fears and sorrows—is not death but precisely the absence of love, and the absence of the ones that love him. For him, solitude and sexual frustration are the real death one can be inflicted on while living. In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," Whitman declares himself unable to cope with solitude and isolation. Using a confessional tone, the poet draws on the image of a vibrant solitary tree to come to a conclusion about his own dependent condition. The poem is an admission of the poet's failure to live alone, of his incapacity to bear loneliness:

> I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
> All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the
> branches,
> Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous
> leaves of dark green,
> And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think
> of myself
> But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing
> alone there without its friend near, for I knew
> I could not,
> (199)

The tree is described not only in a human-like fashion, but also in erotic terms. The potent adjectives used by Whitman—rude, unbending, and lusty—confer to the tree the

appearance of a strong, manly entity. Nonetheless, Pollak states that the tree cannot be really humanized because "to be human is not merely to take up space, to talk, and to feel happy, but to need a society of like-minded friends." It is precisely because the tree is not human that it has the ability to stand joyously "without any companion." Contrary to the tree's capacity for self-sufficiency, and in an anguished state, the poet realizes his inability to deal with solitude. As a human being in need of love and interchange he feels irrevocably bound to the presence of his friends.

Pollak points out that, in spite of the admission of his failure, Whitman cannot help to show an "understandable resentment about his tree-rival's capacity for self-reliant utterance out of a seeming void" (136). Whitman's lines show jealousy of the tree's capacity for independence, but also reveal the effort of a self-examining poet determined to cope with his limitations. Moreover, he seems unafraid of revealing them in verse. Without his friends and lovers the "measureless ocean of love within him," the same he would like to be remembered for in "Recorders Ages Hence," becomes worthless. As in an effort to retain a portion of that crucial quality he lacks, the poet carries with him a part of the tree he enviously admires:

> And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves
> upon it, and twined around it a little moss,
> And I brought it away, and I have placed it in sight
> in my room,
> It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends,
> (For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)
> Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think
> of manly love;
> For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in
> Louisiana solitary in a wide flat space,
> Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend
> a lover near,
> I know I could not.
> (199)

The tree, even in all its self-reliance and exuberance, is not needed to remind the poet of his dear friends. Curiously however, the twig he takes to his room becomes a token of manly love—the poet could be associating the tree's potential for joy in spite of its isolation with one's endurance in the face of all the difficulties and prohibitions of manly love. Regardless of all impediments, manly love would manage to survive, even if alone. The poet, however, admits his incapability for finding the same joy in isolation. Alternatively, the twig with the moss around would be a token of manly love because it is part of the tree's strength, determination, and because of its obvious phallic association.

Nevertheless, the fact that the poet needs to appropriate part of the tree, take a twig to his room, and transform it in a token for manly love still leaves room for questioning. For Pollak, Whitman's "fashionable melancholy" would disclose his imperial desire to control, and tame his rival in an attempt to appropriate the power he lacks. Even though the poet "suffers from the sentimental heartsoreness that seems neverending, he returns to his room with his spoils. Taming the public rival, Whitman replicates the symbolic logic of humiliation-driven male economy from which he seeks to escape and against which he needs his dream-friends to defend him" (136). In Pollak's view, male gendering (including male-male love) is characterized by traditional rivalries that complicate the establishment of bonds among them. In spite of Whitman's contradictions, it seems manifest that Pollak's claim disrupts the main initiative in these poems—the equation of manly love with democracy—which is one of the central arguments in this dissertation.

It is my claim (as it is Martin's as well) that Whitman's poems in "Calamus" differ from other erotic depictions—Plato's *Symposium*, for instance—in their emphasis on democracy, and interchange. The unbalanced, hierarchical relations between men found in classical models are poles apart from the open, egalitarian relations Whitman creates. For

Martin, even if some of Whitman's concepts "derive from Greek homosexuality, the major thrust of the "Calamus" poems is toward a democratic partnership of men" (75). I present a more detailed discussion on the issue of manly love versus the rivalries of male gendering in Whitman's poems in Chapter V, when I discuss Whitman's and Rich's alternatives for the representation of the erotic in their lyrics.

The rejection of male standards and institutions is a constant theme throughout "Calamus." In order to create the democratic fraternity of manly love, Whitman had to discard the traditional ways of a false democracy based in competition and profit. In "I Hear It Was Charged Against Me," the poet defends himself against imaginary accusations that he would be planning to annihilate institutions with his audacious poetry. The poet's total indifference to institutions turns out to be a sophisticated way of criticism:

> I hear it was charged against me that I sought to destroy
> institutions,
> But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
> (What indeed have I in common with them? Or what
> with the destruction of them?)
> Only I will establish in the Mannahatta and in every city
> of these States inland and seaboard,
> And in the field and woods, and above every keel little
> or large that dents the water,
> Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
> the institution of the dear love of comrades.
> (199-200)

The poet's apparent indifference—an absolute disdain for those institutions—displays his disapproval of the way they spoil people's potentialities for creativity and love. Conversely, the "institution of the dear love of comrades" is characterized by its complete anarchism. In Whitman's revolutionary community there are no "edifices or rules or trustees or any argument." In fact, his proposal could be seen as the germ of the hippie communities that would spread around the nation a hundred years after. The difference is

that Whitman idealizes a hippie-like community in which manly love is not only the main reason for its existence, but also its axiom, and cornerstone.

In "Sometimes with One I Love," Whitman deals again with the question of unreturned love, the same theme that becomes his main reason for sadness and anguish in "Recorders Ages Hence." The former, however, differs from the latter as it transforms the negative feeling that comes from rejection into a creative energy. Also, the poem suggests that even out of a disappointing situation, a positive outcome might happen:

> Sometimes with one I love I fill myself with rage for
> fear I effuse unreturn'd love,
> But now I think there is no unreturn'd love, the pay is
> certain one way or another,
> (I love a certain person ardently and my love was
> not return'd,
> Yet out of that I have written these songs).
> (200)

Although his love is not returned, the poet is capable of artistic creation precisely from that discouraged love. Love, even when frustrated, is the center and driving force in Whitman's work. From a moment of rage, the poet comes to a conclusion that "there is no unreturn'd love"—as there is no loss in it because "the pay is certain one way or another." The poem's examination of the relationship between love and art, as Martin has also pointed out, is fundamental to the formation and understanding of "Calamus." The idea that art is deeply dependent on love is present in Whitman's own life as he himself states—"Doubtless I could not have perceived the universe, or written one of my poems, if I had not freely given myself to comrades, to love" (in Martin 86). As Martin says "the perception of self which underlies a work so self-examining as his" could never be achieved if Whitman had not experienced love so intensely as he had.

Paz has stated that while eroticism "is a poetry of the body," poetry, by its turn, is "an eroticism of language"—the analogy devised by Paz could be said to underlie many of the poems in "Calamus," too. The male body in Whitman, the tenderness and intimacy of the bodies in "When I Heard at the Close of the Day," for instance, transforms the body into a metaphor for shelter, happiness, and raison d'être. On the other hand, Whitman's eroticisation of nature and the whole existence has in language its exclusive channel and instrument. In "Scented Herbage of My Breast," the forest, grass, and leaves are mingled with the male body—the phallus, pubis, and limbs become the landscape where the poet enacts his redemption, and rebirth.

Whitman's eroticisation of existence can also be drawn to the city as well. In "Among the Multitude" (as in "City of Orgies," another poem in "Calamus") the poet describes a walk among a multitude as an opportunity for limitless sexual possibilities. The potential lovers that meet accidentally in the city share the same special understanding that Whitman describes as a prerequisite in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand"—a knowledge that connects them at once, whether it is in a forest or amidst a multitude in a big city:

> Among the men and women the multitude,
> I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
> Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband,
> brother, child, any nearer than I am,
> Some are baffled, but this one is not—that one knows me.
>
> Ah lover and perfect equal,
> I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections,
> And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the
> like in you.
> (200-201)

The cruising experience is told in a humorous, almost funny tone that seems to rejoice with the amusing aspect of the episode. Sex is found in a public space, and though it is hidden from the majority—only a few can understand the "secret and divine signs"—it happens in a casual, random way. Some people in the multitude are confused, baffled with their business, and unable to share the poet's enthusiasm. But one among them is aware of the immediacy that joins the two. It is by sending those divine signs that they establish communication. After communication is set up, the poet already sees this person as "lover and perfect equal"—the potential lover discovers the poet by faint indirections, and the poet, the object of attraction, will discover the stranger by the likeness they share. Although Whitman describes a fleeting erotic experience, the democratic character of Benjamin's concept of intersubjectivity present in it—the mutual recognition of subjects—could be said to alter the status of this brief sexual encounter. Ravishment here allows a genuine encounter of equals.

Eroticism and the promise of sexual adventure permeate the city, filling the street with the discharge of passion and sexual excitement. As Grossman has said, Whitman removes the debate about sexuality from the realm of the family, and the private. Sex is not confined to the obligation of heterosexual marriage, and to the sanction of the state. Recognition has to happen, as Martin states, in spite of "the absence of a socially sanctioned form to express that love" (87). Whitman's discredit of institutions, of the standards and social codes that form the false democracy he despised authorizes the encounter between the two men in the multitude. Their sexual attraction—their sincerity in showing it to each other—brings them close as equals. In Martin's words "[i]t is their love that makes men equal. For Whitman, it was the equality of men that made any relationship

between them more democratic than any heterosexual relationship, which must be founded upon inherent inequalities of power and status" (87).

However, in "That Shadow My Likeness," one of the final poems in "Calamus," Whitman would still question his vocation, and real self—and maybe his sexual impulses. The poet compares himself to a shadow which, assuming human characteristics, seeks for a "livelihood, chattering, chaffering" in constant and uncertain movements. The volatility of the shadow, its evanescent nature reminds the poet of his own self—his constant search and anxiety, the difficulty to fulfill his need for affection and physical contact, and all the troubles it could cause. When the poet is among his lovers and his lyric, then he never doubts his true self, his position as the poet of comrades:

> That shadow my likeness that goes to and fro seeking
> a livelihood, chattering, chaffering,
> How often I find myself standing and looking at it where
> it flits,
> How often I question and doubt whether that is really me;
> But among my lovers and caroling these songs,
> O I never doubt whether that is really me.
> (201)

For Martin, the poem demonstrates how "the Whitman who lives in the conventional world is opposed to the Whitman of the love poems" (85). It is Martin's view that the poem depicts two opposite realities as in prior poems—or better two selves—but this time they are not contrasting, or excluding. They are juxtaposed, and they coexist. The "real" Whitman, however, is the one that is satisfied among his lovers and creating love poems. The other self is his social persona, just as we see in "In Paths Untrodden" where the poet previously looked for conformities and material pleasures to feed his soul from the lack of love and satisfaction. This double existence, and the necessity to "perform" is also

an illustration of the hardship homosexuals had to face during nineteenth-century America—as incredibly they still do nowadays.

The question of the self, and its ramifications is not a stable concept to tackle in Whitman's poems. If in *Leaves of* Grass Whitman describes the existence of a true self, a "real me" that is separate and independent of social norms—in "Calamus" this question becomes more complex. According to Pollak, in most poems of the "Calamus" sequence "this real me no longer exists as a separate and mocking entity because the speaker's social self is more substantial. That is, once the social self is experienced as real, the real me has no autonomous psychological function" (146). It is precisely the effort to rescue this "real me" that has been undermined by the trivialities of a cruel and shallow world that underlies basically all poems in the sequence. Already in "In Paths Untrodden," Whitman demonstrates his endeavor to leave behind his social persona to embrace the consistent dimension where his "real self" could be liberated.

The split self is, then, intrinsically linked to the opposition of diverging realities that Whitman explores throughout the poems. As Martin points out, the "opposition between a living death and a new life, structured around the imagery of conversion and rebirth" (79) would be one of the main leitmotifs in "Calamus." That rebirth and satisfaction is achieved with the full acceptance of manly love is something the poet has made explicit in these poems. Nonetheless, the erotic appeal of "Calamus" lies in its emphasis on the "learning of affection" more than in its sexual connotations. For Martin, "although there are many passages in praise of the phallus and of sexuality in *Leaves of Grass*, 'Calamus' is devoted almost exclusively to the celebration of being together; the lovers kiss and embrace, they sleep together, but they are not depicted in actual sexual acts" (83).

Whitman has attempted to formulate a very audacious—and somehow naïve—project in "Calamus", and maybe in *Democratic Vistas*, too. His equation of adhesiveness with democracy, the full incorporation of manly love to his democratic project for America has never achieved the least portion of its daring formulations. In times of fundamentalism and continuing hate crimes against gays—one needs only to remember the case of Matthew Shepard, age 22, brutally murdered in 1998 in the city of Laramie for being gay—homosexuality is still faced as an aberration in North America (and in most countries as well). Incredibly, most people in the U.S. still refuse to see Whitman as homosexual. Woods has decided to step forward in *A History of Gay Literature* to denounce

> all those Americans who remain uneasy when the Good Gray Poet is said to have been gay. Not a word of the homo-erotic poetry is ever quoted. I offer this text as exemplifying the extent to which Whitman's homosexuality both must and yet cannot be acknowledged in the United States. Manifestly, his destiny is to be treated as the embarrassment which, for much of his career, he sought to become. In that sense, the unease he still causes is a measure of his continuing success (159).

It seems ironic that Whitman has predicted the fact in "Here the Frailest Leaves of Me"—he was right to think that "Calamus" would be his "strongest lasting." But even more ironic—not to say sad—is the fact that the "homoerotic Whitman," the one who joyfully sang manly love, is still not acknowledged in his own country, a land he has loved and cared intensely. Ironical is also the fact that "Calamus" had to become famous through tortuous paths—the poems have become famous by negation. The deletion of homosexuality in literature, and in most areas of human knowledge is also a primary theme in the work of the North American poet Adrienne Rich. The next chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to Rich's consistent political project and raging poems against this deletion,

and her refusal to be part of the “don’t ask don’t tell” policy that regulates homosexual existence in the U.S.

Chapter III

1- Lesbian Existence, Female Experience, and the Question of Difference

This chapter cannot begin before an important distinction is made. Although the main objective in this dissertation is to discuss and find new forms to represent the erotic, other forms different from the patriarchal ones, it takes in as its object of analysis two diverse states of affairs. The erotic experiences evoked by the two poets here—Whitman and Rich—even if similar in many aspects, differ in that they come from distinct kinds of knowledge: the political forces which these two kinds of experiences are subjected to make them unique in their constitution, and in the setbacks both have to face. Therefore, one cannot address these two distinct experiences and sensibilities—i.e., male homosexuality and lesbian existence—as if they were simply corresponding.

Because they differ from, and are subordinated to the conventional heterosexual matrix, these two conditions tend to be seen and treated as equivalent. Nonetheless, in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Rich calls attention to the fact that:

> Any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian experience as a marginal or less "natural" phenomenon, as mere "sexual preference," or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relation is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its contributions. (206)

As Irigaray has pointed out, one of the outcomes of the Establishment's refusal to acknowledge sexual difference is the favoring and crystallizing of social injustices—a discrimination perpetrated by a hierarchical system of male standards that, while blurring differences, maintains heterosexuality as the ruling norm. Lesbians (heterosexual women and gay men as well) should then strive for gaining recognition precisely because of their

difference in order to achieve a just subjective status and social treatment. Even if comparisons between lesbian existence and male homosexuality are sometimes done with the intention of creating a community of people that differs from the heterosexual majority, and are thus marginalized because of that, this alleged equivalence could blur important differences that, as Rich says, weaken any theory that attempts to challenge male superiority.

This study is, therefore, aware of the dangers of generalization or misinterpretation in trying to encompass these two distinct experiences under the same analysis. However, it is my claim that Whitman and Rich share important aspects that, when taken into consideration, somehow connect their poetic production, and the ideas found in their political prose. In fact, both poets have developed a very similar way of portraying eroticism—the erotic representations they create are often the product of a democratic partnership between two subjects. In both lyrics we find the attempt to create relationships in which two complete subjects can coexist and interchange in their mutual respect. Moreover, these representations rely strongly on friendship, support, comradeship, and in the belief that erotic representations should be separated from the exclusiveness of the body. In their attempt for renovation and understanding of their condition, both Whitman and Rich have confronted and revised patriarchal notions of eroticism as a device working predominantly for male benefit and control.

Yet, the question of difference is seen by some critics as a problematical aspect in Rich's work, especially in her prose. In the same essay mentioned before, Rich claims that feminists should stop simply "tolerating" the existence of lesbians as a mere "alternative life style." Instead, she argues that a "feminist critique of compulsory heterosexual orientation for women is long overdue" (206). According to her, the institution of

heterosexuality oppresses all kinds of women—lesbians or not. Feminists should then formulate a critique of the authority of this institution that, at the same time that tyrannizes women and prevents them to bond, maintains men in power. In *Adrienne Rich—Passion, Politics and the Body*, Liz Yorke argues that Rich's essay "addresses itself to the crucial task of creating a community of resistance, inviting both lesbians and heterosexual feminists to bond together in recognizing manifest prescription, coercion, compulsion, colonization and other serious misuses of power within the institutions of heterosexuality" (82).

Nonetheless, Rich's attempt backfires as some critics observe in her approach the possibility of an essential vision of women as a group with a common and fundamental nature. In fact, Yorke has identified in Rich's work (and in Irigaray's as well) a double gesture in which a global politics that "seeks to address the problem of women's universal oppression" coexists with a particular politics that addresses each woman's individual situation. For Yorke, Rich's politics is informed by the idea that "women are not a definable group with a common essence and identity, and yet there are 'millions of obscure women' whose 'ordinary' subjection as *women*, will inform their activism" (88). I offer a more detailed analysis of the question of difference, and the charges of essentialism in Rich's prose—charges that Yorke does not partake—in the concluding chapter of this dissertation. My objective is to question these charges using extracts from "Twenty-One Love Poems" and discussing them in the context of Rich's other writings. I believe what makes this attempt possible is the strong coherence one finds between Rich's prose and her poems. The dialogue between "Twenty-One Love Poems" and the prose selected here is a compelling example of that.

The "Twenty-One Love Poems" have first been published as part of Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*. Although the book was edited in 1978, it brings a selection of poems written between 1974 and 1977. These poems have become a turning point in Rich's career as they establish her total political commitment to opposing the institution of heterosexuality, and the suppression of lesbian existence from the public arenas. Moreover, the "Poems" consolidate Rich's belief that a new, female-centered erotics can be fashioned in spite of all the limitations imposed by patriarchy.

Curiously, Rich's strategy in the "Poems" resonates with much of what Whitman has attempted to do in *Democratic Vistas,* and in "Calamus" as well. In order to solve the problem of namelessness in relation to manly love, Whitman created the concept of *adhesiveness*—a word meant to signify, and categorize the love of men to men. In "Calamus" this love is the central theme and creative energy, and it demands to be heard. Similarly, in her "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich abandons coded language, and the masks lesbian poets are forced to wear, and she demands to be heard as well. According to Yorke "[t]his combative political aim gives impetus to the courageous acts of naming and defining of the coming-out poems collected in *The Dream of a Common Language*. This collection was written contemporaneously to *Of Woman Born* and the themes of the poems and the book resonate powerfully each with the other" (79).

In fact, it would be more accurate to say Rich "renames" lesbian experience—in her refusal to accept the word *lesbianism*, and in her introduction of the terms *lesbian existence*, and *lesbian continuum*, she is thoroughly re-signifying it, and rejecting the patriarchal, clinical connotations we have known so far. In *Private Poets, Worldly Acts*, Kevin Stein claims that in the "apparent paradox of renaming what had before been 'nameless,' Rich also provides a fitting metaphor for the kind of historical 're-vision' she has worked toward

since 1963" (41). Although this experience was not nameless—as it has been named *lesbianism*—the individual behind it have long been treated as invisible, non-existing, or deviant. In "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich manifestly steps forward to denounce this erasure, and renounce the burden patriarchy has given her. But more than this, the "Poems" are a call for the creation of a new paradigm, one that is female-centered, and female-oriented.

2- Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems"—On How to *Invent What We Desire*

Although the title of the "Poems" announces they are composed of twenty-one lyrics dedicated to explore the issue of love, they are, in fact, made up of twenty-two short poems. All of them are numbered in Roman numerals, except one which is called "THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED." The insertion of this unnumbered poem explains the difference in the final computation. The longest of these poems—poem IV—has twenty-one lines, and all lyrics follow the technique of free verse. The version of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" used in this dissertation is the one reprinted in 1993 in Barbara C. Gelpi's and Albert Gelpi's selection *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose.*

The "Twenty-One Love Poems" can be considered as having a unique construction within the male-dominated literary tradition of love poems. Using a traditional poetic structure, Rich is able to reconfigure the experience of recounting a love affair. According to Stein, Rich's innovation comes from the fact that the poems:

> deliberately play off associations with the patriarchal tradition of the Elizabethan love sonnet. In Rich's series, however, the speaker directly addresses a lesbian lover, charting the heady rise of the relationship and its painful decline as poignantly as any male poet's recounting of his love affair with a lovely maiden. (41)

In Stein's view, Rich's discourse is thus doubled as she is able to speak simultaneously to her lover and "to the patriarchal literary history she inherits." By using the same prescription given by patriarchy, she challenges, and reverses the restrictedness of a masculine means of expression. The appropriation of an ancient, worn out formula gives rise to the possibility of reinvention of form and content—a new love lyric depicting female homosexual desire.

Poem I introduces the scenery where the speaker is inserted, and presents an acid account of the conditions which women who are outside patriarchal laws have to cope with because of their forbidden desire. The city is described as a place of degradation, cruelty, a place where both vampires and victims dwell. The use of the pronoun "we" in "we need to grasp our lives inseparable / from those rancid dreams" makes apparent the patriarchal connection between lesbian existence and all the degradation that resides in the city. In a sense, Rich provides the context where her love story will develop, never losing sight of the constraints imposed to the two lovers:

> Whenever in this city, screens flicker
> with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,
> victimized hirelings bending to the lash,
> we also have to walk … if simply as we walk
> through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
> of our own neighborhoods.
> We need to grasp our lives inseparable
> from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces,
> and the red begonia perilously flashing
> from a tenement six stories high,
> or the long-legged young girls playing ball
> in the junior highschool playground.
> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
> our animal passion rooted in the city.

(77)[1]

Although these outsider women have to engage in the cruel task of grasping their lives inseparable from all the misery that have been described, they also cannot forget the beauty that is implied too. Beauty here has a cruel connotation—both the red begonia "perilously flashing / from a tenement six stories high," and the "long-legged young girls playing ball / in the junior highschool playground" convey a feeling of danger, of a perilous beauty always at risk because settled in the city. Ironically, in *Stein, Bishop, and Rich—Lyrics of Love, War, & Place*, Margaret Dickie claims that the speaker in the "Poems" is, in fact, constantly engaging in a process of evasion rather than awareness. Because the speaker *internalizes* danger, she is "often engaged in 'self-ghosting,' claiming to come out but always hiding." For Dickie, although Rich tries to locate her love life in the real world, this real world is a "dream world," a ghostly one with screens flickering with pornography, and science-fiction vampires. In her view, even when in the end Rich associates the lovers with nature, the trees she describes "are in danger in a poisonous world" (151). Therefore, Dickie sees Rich's strategy of grasping her condition as a lesbian with the "dreamy" and "ghostly" elements of the city as no more than a process of evasion, of self-erasure.

Going in the opposite direction, Adrian Oktenberg states in "'Disloyal to Civilization': The *Twenty-One Love Poems* of Adrienne Rich," that Rich's criticism to patriarchy could only begin in the city—the apex of patriarchal culture and "the center of industry, commerce, law, culture. It is appropriate, and necessary, that the poem begins there." In his view, the speaker's disloyalty to this civilization and its "meaningful artifacts: the imagery of violence, human distortion, gynephobia, horror" (330) is undoubtedly

[1] This citation is taken from the 1993 selection *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*. All subsequent citations, including those from *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far*, pertain to this particular edition. The respective page numbers will be supplied.

apparent in the "Poems." Thus, rather than being an evasion as Dickie sees it, Rich's location of lesbian existence in the city (even with its ghostly characters) signals her awareness of centuries of oppression, humiliation, human waste, and the necessity to oppose this. For Oktenberg, to be disloyal to all this "has become urgent necessity"—it is my claim as well that Rich's main impulse in these poems is precisely the denial of self-ghosting, of victimization. There is nothing dreamy or ghostly about the city she describes—these are real horrors: "the tabloid cruelties / of our own neighborhoods."

The unexpected character of the lovers' enterprise is made explicit in the verse "No one has imagined us." Rich's inscription of female love within a tradition that has utterly ignored this possibility—the absence of representation of love between women in patriarchal culture is a proof of that—is what makes her attempt so challenging. For Oktenberg, Rich "means that no man, no work of literature, no part of patriarchal culture has taken into account the possibility of two women together, loving each other, and of this as the embryonic beginning of a new, woman-centered civilization" (331). And yet, they want to live long "like trees / sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air / dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding." They want to bear fruit even in the middle of this hostile scenery, and their "animal," urgent passion, though "rooted in the city" strives to take root and flourish.

Poem II narrows down this love relationship to show all the impediments these women have to face daily to live their "animal passion." The poem also introduces the question of intimacy, the intrusion of the external world in their private life, and the problem of visibility. The cozy safety of their house, full of books and poems, is contrasted with the difficulties of the external world "which is not simple." The speaker dreams her

lover is a poem—*a poem I wanted to show someone*—but as poem II demonstrates, visibility is not simple in the real world:

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,
you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
our friend the poet comes into my room
where I've been writing for days,
drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
and I want to show her one poem
which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
and wake. You've kissed my hair
to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem*,
I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone …*
and I laugh and fall dreaming again
of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.
(77-78)

Again Dickie associates contradictions in the speaker's dream—the transformation of her lover into abstract language, and the desire for freedom out of that—as a sign of evasion. Thus, she states the speaker "is dreaming of coming out, of writing the poem she is actually writing, and yet she is turning the human and emotional world into language, spiritualizing it, dematerializing it, making a person a poem. Dreaming a lover into a poem may be a treacherous evasion" (151). The speaker in the "Poems," as Dickie sees her, is always caught between a desire to come out, to become visible, and the abstractionist impetus of hiding in language her truest will.

However, we see that the poet is, in fact, aware of the irony of the speaker's condition rather than engaging in an unrealistic way of solving her dilemma. The verse "I laugh and fall dreaming again / of the desire to show you to everyone I love" conveys the poet's awareness of the incongruity of the speaker's desire. The laugh is ironical for it

carries the consciousness of the limitations of the set in which they are inserted. For Oktenberg, the lovers in the "Poems" are constantly caught in the contradictions of a patriarchal world—"[l]iving in such a world *is* a paradoxical project for them … And why should not gravity reverse itself, and pull grass up with the 'upbreathing air?'" (334). Ultimately, to want recognition, freedom, visibility in a hostile, male world *is* a paradoxical enterprise, but not a "*treacherous evasion"* (my italics).

As with the lovers striding hand in hand through fields in Whitman's "Calamus," the final lines of Poem II convey the speaker's dream of moving "openly together / in the pull of gravity, which is not simple." Similarly, Whitman's lovers move openly together in the open spaces, but not without the poet's awareness of the risks to be taken: "But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching / lest any person for miles around approaches unawares" (Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand). Whitman's lovers also become poems he desires to show his readers, despite the "pull of gravity, which is not simple." The outside world is never simple for outcast lovers. It takes a gigantic effort to change this situation, an endeavor as obstinate as fighting gravity—one compared to Whitman's effort to restore the "materialistic and vulgar American democracy" through his "fervid comradeship" in *Democratic Vistas*, an effort surely demanding a high price for those who dare to dream it.

As the sequence proceeds, Rich begins to detail the difficulties, and the impediments the two lovers had known before meeting each other. Hence, poem III discusses the question of the passing of time, but a time that has passed to evidence the forced losses they had to accept and live with. The lovers have spent years missing each other, unable to establish contact, deprived of the means to do so. The speaker asks herself "[d]id I ever walk the morning streets at twenty / my limbs streaming with a purer joy?" As

the two lovers meet, the passing of time becomes once again a cause for questioning—is it possible to recover the years they have been missing each other? And, as the speaker says, since they are not young anymore "weeks have to do time" for all the years they have longed for each other. In a situation like that, knowing the limits becomes a necessity:

Since we're not young, weeks have to do time
for years of missing each other. Yet only this odd warp
in time tells me we're not young.
Did I ever walk the morning streets at twenty,
my limbs streaming with a purer joy?
did I lean from any window over the city
listening for the future
as I listen here with nerves tuned for your ring?
And you, you move toward me with the same tempo.
Your eyes are everlasting, the green spark
of the blue-eyed grass of early summer,
the green-blue wild cress washed by the spring.
At twenty, yes: we thought we'd live forever.
At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.
I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
and somehow, each of us will help the other live,
and somewhere, each of us must help the other die.
(78)

The meeting of the lovers is a crucial aspect in this poem. Against all odds, they manage to find each other as they move "with the same tempo" in mutual recognition. As Oktenberg notices "[t]he lovers *meet*, minds and passion equally joined, as they have not met before in Rich's poetry." According to him, this "fully engaged, intellectual and passionate meeting" (335) gains importance not because the lovers involved are two women (though the fact is significantly rare in literature), but precisely because the meeting happens "on terms which are consciously antipatriarchal; lovers who are disloyal to patriarchal civilization strive to free themselves from its attitudes even in their intimate relations, even in themselves" (336).

On the other hand, one cannot forget that their passion is rooted in the city, right in the middle of the patriarchal territory. The dichotomy between the two realities becomes a permanent source of contradiction and anguish for the lovers. Thus, the paradoxical nature of their existence is conveyed through the contradictions that permeate the whole sequence. On the last lines of poem III, for instance, the limitations of time, and the awareness of their frailty in the face of a crude reality is expressed in the urgency of their touching—"I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow"—love and sorrow are blended together, and the comfort they give each other must "help the other live" and "help the other die." Moreover, the lines also break with the love conventions of traditional sonnets precisely in their awareness of the restrictions of love. Having known each other late in their lives, and sharing a love that is marginal, the possibility of eternal and sublime love is utterly discarded.

Obviously, a meeting that confronts patriarchal organization is most likely to be continuously tested, discouraged. Poem IV demonstrates how the cruelty of the outside world can unexpectedly invade their private lives to turn upside down what was momentarily serene. The poem describes a sequence of daily activities performed by the speaker who is coming from her lover's home. Arriving home from a day of ordinary shopping in the city, the speaker enters the kitchen to "unload [her] bundles"—she could be said to unload both her groceries, and also her sorrows at her lover's recollection—"I come home from you through the early light of spring." From this point on, there seems to be a relaxed mood in the poem. The reference to delicious coffee, delicious music, her body "still light and heavy" with the presence of her loved one, all make us share her momentary bliss. A brutal reality, however, sneaks through the scene to put an end to the temporary harmony:

I come home from you through the early light of spring
flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado,
the Discount Wares, the shoe-store … I'm lugging my sack
of groceries, I dash for the elevator
where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
lets the door almost close on me. –*For god's sake hold it*!
I croak at him. –*Histerical*, –he breathes my way.
I let myself into the kitchen, unload my bundles,
make coffee, open the window, put on Nina Simone
singing *Here comes the sun* … I open the mail,
drinking delicious coffee, delicious music,
my body still light and heavy with you. The mail
lets fall a Xerox of something written by a man
aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison:
My genitals have been the object of such a sadistic display
they keep me constantly awake with the pain …
Do whatever you can to survive.
You know, I think that men love wars …
And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds
break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,
and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms.
(78-79)

The intromission comes with the mail—the man's testimony of his torture in prison, of his constant pain, revives the speaker's old wounds, and her short rapture is destroyed altogether. Her "incurable anger," her "unmendable wounds," temporarily forgotten, suddenly take her over. Living in a world controlled by men—*You know, I think that men love wars*—she cannot help crying in the face of a world which forces them to be apart, a world of wars and misery. Just like the man in prison, she too is constantly kept awake with pain, as in a war of nerves meant to destroy her confidence, her courage. But the man has said "[*d*]*o whatever you can to survive*"—and along the following poems, the speaker will formulate ways in which women can survive outside patriarchal laws, in spite of the constant pain.

Poem V demonstrates the ways in which women have been silenced by these laws, and also how other minorities such as gay men have been stigmatized and vilified by male

intolerance. The monsters that could "crack open" her apartment "full of books" stand as a clear reference to the violence perpetrated by men who love wars—physical force can easily destroy ideas. Nonetheless, books have their power, too. Once open, they can show the underside of everything one loves, and the harsh reality of *unwanted children* (my italics)—"women, deviants, witnesses," and all the ones who have been dominated, and silenced:

This apartment full of books could crack open
to the thick jaws, the bulging eyes
of monsters, easily: Once open the books, you have to face
the underside of everything you've loved—
the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag
even the best voices have had to mumble through,
the silence burying unwanted children—
women, deviants, witnesses—in desert sand.
Kenneth tells me he's been arranging his books
so he can look at Blake and Kafka while he types;
yes; and we still have to reckon with Swift
loathing the woman's flesh while praising her mind,
Goethe's dread of the Mothers, Claudel vilifying Gide,
and the ghosts—their hands clasped for centuries—
of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake,
centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
and we still have to stare into the absence
of men who would not, women who could not, speak
to our life—this still unexcavated hole
called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.
(79)

It is a fact that men can exert their power over women in multiple ways. Rich has shown in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" that men withhold "*from them* [women] *large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments*—[by means of noneducation of females, the "Great Silence" regarding women and particularly lesbian existence in history and culture … discrimination against women in the professions]" (208). As the poem states: "even the best voices have had to mumble through"—and we can think of an infinite list of women who have been enduring throughout history the same silencing,

the same intolerance. In spite of the fact that the "Poems" are absolutely aware of this harsh reality, they alternatively create the possibility of a different social dimension for women—the denial of suffering and self-victimization gives rise to responsibility and action.

As Oktenberg states, Rich is concerned with two civilizations in the "Poems." The first civilization is the one constructed by patriarchy, the "still unexcavated hole called civilization, / this act of translation, this half-world." The records of this civilization, because incomplete, tendentious, are yet to be translated. However, he goes on, "patriarchal civilization is only the starting point, the thesis, for the argument. Rich is equally concerned to grasp and place beside it, as opposition and reproach, another conception of civilization—one that is woman-centered, woman-identified, woman created." The "Poems" are then part of the "struggle to imagine a woman-centered way in the word" (331). The few male names the speaker brings about—Blake, Kafka, Swift, Goethe, and Claudel—are just an example of how men massively stand out in culture, and how women have been underrated, excluded from knowledge. Also, the mentioning of the episode in which Andre Gide was publicly vilified by Paul Claudel for being homosexual is another example of the excluding practices of male culture. Women are "the ghosts" in this civilization, banned from the systems of communication, prevented from writing in "centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves"—the shelves of male culture.

Yet, Dickie describes how the speaker in poem V "in an apartment full of books by men" thinks about the condition of women, while in "all this musing, the poet is alone, her lover silent" (152). In Dickie's view, the speaker is impotent, and always on the verge of a "ghostly awareness," as if the speaker did not reckon how women have been forced to "stare into the absence / of men who would not, women who could not, speak / to our life." If men refuse to speak on behalf of women, and women are prevented of speaking on

behalf of themselves, then it is quite comprehensible that the speaker is in a gloomy mood sometimes. But the "Poems," far from sinking in self-pity and impotence, propose a reaction, a new attitude to redeem women's strength and break the cycle of resignation, and powerlessness.

It is precisely this female strength that we find in poem VI. The women portrayed here diverge from the self-pitying creatures Dickie refers to as they are seen "handling power-tools," or "touching a human face." If men have had the power so far, and used it many times for destruction—*You know, I think that men love wars* (IV)—women have used their strength in a much wiser manner. They can pilot a ship, and handle tools, but also they can comfort the one who suffers, and bring the unborn child "rightways in the birth canal" with the same strength, the same grasp. The speaker begins the poem by contemplating her lover's hands that, despite being small, can perform courageous actions, and inspire confidence:

Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
handling power-tools or steering-wheel
or touching a human face … Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship
through icebergs, or piece together
the fine, needle-like sherds of a great krater-cup
bearing on its sides
figures of ecstatic women striding
to the sibyl's den or the Eleusinian cave—
such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
with such restraint, with such a grasp
of the range and limits of violence
that violence ever after would be obsolete.
(79-80)

Rich's portrayal of women destabilizes previous representations in which they are described as dependent, incapable creatures. Contrary to what Dickie has stated, the speaker of the "Poems" is not alone, she is part of a community, and certainly not all women are willing to accept the silence she accuses the speaker's lover in the poem to be immersed in. Violence is then converted in a creative energy that can transform the circumstances, and bring life. As Oktenberg argues: "[t]he language, the laws … of patriarchy must be transmuted, like the violence of poem VI, into a structure at once recognizable, yet fully expressive of and responsive to, our female passions and minds" (337).

In the attempt to formulate this transformation, the speaker, who is a poet as well, will question her vocation as a writer, and the implications of her trade in poem VII—if writing words sometimes may sound as an unsuitable activity, language is still the means to understand the world, and continue living. As Oktenberg argues, to reinvent new laws, new images, other than the patriarchal ones, is something "still largely unmapped, still in the process of discovery. Like the nineteenth-century feminists who compiled *A History of Woman's Suffrage* while the vote was in the process of being won, we know we must work it out while we are also living it" (337)—the speaker is aware of the inevitability of this challenge, to change the "charted system" while also living it, though not unconscious that words might also become an act of sublimation, an escape:

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
What atonement is this all about?
—and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living.
Is all this close to the wolverine's howled signals,
that modulated cantata of the wild?
or, when away from you I try to create you in words,
am I simply using you, like a river or a war?
And how have I used rivers, how have I used wars
to escape writing of the worst thing of all—

not the crimes of others, not even our own death,
but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough
so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem
mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves?
(80)

Transference and avoidance are the elements the speaker fears to be engaging in: is she using her as men have used rivers, and wars in their own benefit? Paradoxically, she admits to have used rivers and wars to "escape writing of the worst thing of all"—to subside in fear, and fail to "want our freedom passionately enough." "Our" here refers to the two lovers' freedom, but also to all those that are frequently marginalized and, in a sense, imprisoned. While Whitman's biggest fears are isolation, sexual frustration, and the absence of love (as we see in "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing"), Rich's are resignation, and apathy. For Oktenberg, the speaker's identification with beasts, wolverines, dream-ghosts, outlaws, and even the reference of their "animal passion" tell the hidden story of women, especially lesbians. Thus, he argues that the "*sotto voce* stream, or the subtext, of the "Poems" is the secret life of women—those who are openly disloyal to patriarchal forms are secretly loyal to antipatriarchal ones" (333). Secrecy (or the *ghostliness*) is an imposition, not a choice. This is the paradoxical nature of their existence.

Poem VIII introduces a reaction against this system that imprisons women—by refusing to accept the passivity that has been the mark of femaleness so far, and by insisting that women should fight "the temptation to make a career of pain," the speaker subverts this very system. This is a new political position—the refusal to play a part in this imposed suffering, and a vigorous rejection of victimization. Moreover, as Stein has said, the "Poems" subvert the patriarchal tradition of the love sonnet as they appropriate its codes (the use of Greek mythology, for instance) to create a female narrative:

I can see myself years back at Sunion,
hurting with an infected foot, Philoctetes
in woman's form, limping the long path,
lying on a headland over the dark sea,
looking down the red rocks to where a soundless curl
of white told me a wave has struck,
imagining the pull of that water from the height,
knowing deliberate suicide wasn't my métier,
yet all the time nursing, measuring that wound.
Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished
her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.
I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,
but I want to go from here with you
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.
(80-81)

In Greek mythology, Philoctetes was a warrior who was abandoned by his comrades on a desert island on the way to the Trojan War for having a hurt foot. The speaker imagines herself as a female version of Philoctetes that, once alone on the island, considers the possibility of suicide, of which she knew "wasn't [her] métier." She is the descendant of the woman who once "cherished her suffering"—as in Rich's notion of *lesbian existence*, and *lesbian continuum*, the speaker has learned from the past with the lessons of other women, whether lesbians or not. The "scar-tissue" she mentions is the emblem of this new attitude, and from this point on she can renovate the meaning of that existence.

Recognition of traditional, self-destructive female patterns of behavior is a first step to fashion this new position—the second one is their total refusal. As Oktenberg argues: "The traditional 'choices' for women, self-destruction, suicide, martyrdom, are recognized for the deathtraps they are" (337). Hiding in suffering may be a *tempting* evasion, but "that's finished. / The woman who cherished / her suffering is dead." The image of a female version of the Greek warrior becomes then a powerful one—it proclaims not abandonment, neither martyrdom nor suicide, but a strength that is based in

companionship: ”I want to go from here with you / fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.”

Dickie has argued that the speaker in the “Twenty-One Love Poems,” though seeming to offer a reaction, is constantly going through a process of self-ghosting, of self-evasion. However, the speaker in poem IX indirectly presents the backdrop of the female model Dickie accuses her to personify. Because of the impossibility of articulation the speaker refers to—“I fear this silence, / this inarticulate life”—silence becomes a routine. Hundreds of years of oppression and silencing lie behind these inarticulate lives. The poem begins with a metaphor in which silence is transformed into a pond where “drowned things live”—her lover’s silence, a pond full of live secrets, is the hidden facet the speaker wants to be exposed:

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live
I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun.
It’s not my own face I see there, but other faces,
even your face at another age.
Whatever’s lost there is needed by both of us—
a watch of gold, a water-blurred fever chart,
a key … Even the silt and pebbles of the bottom
deserve their glint of recognition. I fear this silence,
this inarticulate life. I’m waiting
for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water
for once, and show me what I can do
for you, who have often made the unnameable
nameable for others, even for me.
(81)

The silence of “men who would not, women who could not, speak / to our life,” mentioned in Poem V, echoes in the lover’s silence. Nonetheless, as the speaker suggests, hidden secrets need to be exorcized, and brought into light because “[w]hatever’s lost there is needed by both of us.” It is by recognizing even the “silt and pebbles of the bottom”—the seemingly unimportant details—that both of them can change their situation. Without

facing this hidden side, they remain mute, overpowered, or, as Dickie would say, "ghostly." The deletion of homosexuality goes on precisely through its obstruction from the processes of significance, and representation. Poem IX also introduces a crisis in the couple—they react differently in the face of their "inarticulate life." While the speaker wants to exorcize the secrets, and help her partner, her lover drowns in silence and secrets, unable to get rid of the sad legacy that was given to her.

The secret life of women reappears in poem X where the lovers, as if confined in their house, "conspire" at dawn. For Oktenberg, the "underground life of lovers in the 'Poems' is constantly alluded to, and comes from the deeply buried parts of the 'primitive' psyche, which continually assert themselves" (332). Given that lesbian existence has faced centuries of repression, and condemnation, and that this existence has been frequently associated with deviance, and sickness, it is understandable why the women in the "Poems" sometimes seem to be trapped in secrecy—fated to be clandestine:

Your dog, tranquil and innocent, dozes through
our cries, our murmured dawn conspiracies
our telephone calls. She knows—what can she know?
If in my human arrogance I claim to read
her eyes, I find there only my own animal thoughts:
that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort,
that voices of the psyche drive through the flesh
further than the dense brain could have foretold,
that the planetary nights are growing cold for those
on the same journey, who want to touch
one creature-traveler clear to the end;
that without tenderness, we are in hell.
(81)

In the speaker's "animal thoughts" creatures must "find each other for bodily comfort"—echoing Lorde's assertion about the sharing of joy (be it physical, emotional, or psychic), and work from which women can create the "empowering joy" to fight male domination, the formation of female bonds becomes an essential necessity. In the journey

through cold nights, the "creature-travelers" the speaker alludes to are the ones forbidden to touch each other "clear to the end." By preventing women to bond, and by establishing the compulsion of heterosexuality, patriarchal society maintains its authority.

Interestingly, the speaker's yearning for tenderness, something that could alleviate their hard journey through planetary nights, is the same yearning we see in Whitman's "Calamus." In "Of the Terrible Doubts of Appearances," for instance, the poet disregards all metaphysical questions, and all convictions created by men as mere speculations. The tenderness of his comrade holding him by the hand while they travel is enough to make him indifferent to men's worries and sanctions—"But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied, / He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me." In a sense, both poets criticize the "human arrogance" for too much reliance on the brain, and both rely strongly on love and tenderness. However, it seems that in Rich's case the two lovers could hardly be indifferent to the constraints of their situation. As the lovers cannot find room for tenderness they "are in hell," trapped in a world with no communication, no history, and no solace.

The journey continues in poem XI—lesbian existence seems to be portrayed in the metaphor of the hard journey up a hill the two lovers are taking. Although the path is steep, difficult, their proximity, their mutual support seems to modify the experience. The problematic presence of the female in the world is explored through the use of paradoxes that convey the contradictions Rich wants to tackle. As Oktenberg states, in order to "express paradoxical thoughts, the poet requires a language of paradox. The imagery of the 'Poems' is also substantially oxymoronic, and this contributes to the shock of the reader's response" (333):

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes,
making them eternally and visibly female.
No height without depth, without a burning core,

Though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.
I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain
smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod,
I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,
never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower
unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her,
that clings to the slowly altering rock—
that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves,
was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us.
(81-82)

Rich describes the world literally in female terms, and this is certainly an erotic gaze. In fact, the play of words implying the idea of shape—"peak" as phallic, "crater," female—deconstructs the autonomy of the phallus, showing its dependence on the female: 'No height without depth, without a burning core." Yet, for Dickie the fact that Rich associates the female with nature seems to be quite problematical. At a certain point in her text, Dickie asks if Rich has accepted "the old-age male-inspired association of woman with nature" (151). In her view, Rich's attempt to conceive a female erotics is compromised as she ends by borrowing patriarchal, heterosexual imagery. In fact, the association of the female with nature has been a colonial, patriarchal trope since long. Some of John Donne's poems, for instance, are a clear example on how the female body has been transformed into a landscape to be conquered, and colonized.

Nevertheless, the impetus to dominate nature, whether it is associated with female characteristics or not, is never to be found in Rich—just as for Whitman, nature for her is a permanent source of wisdom and inspiration. Besides, this source in Rich is in total compliance with her attempt to build a female-centered perception of the world to resist male domination. The "jewel-like flower" that clings to the rock they are climbing "was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us." Nature is not a commodity to be appropriated, but a wise, timeless thing that surpasses human limitations. Moreover, the

female nature Rich creates differs from the harmonic, passive depictions one finds in patriarchal writings. Even though Rich is inspired by those secular, traditional texts, nature in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" welcomes contradictions, and teaches resistance.

According to Stein, Rich's appropriation of the patriarchal tradition of writing enables her "to speak both to the lover and to the patriarchal literary history she inherits." In doing so, she manages to reverse "the language of traditional male-female love poems to serve her own purposes." Stein also believes that Rich was successful in subverting, and renewing a tradition of heterosexual love poems that has become increasingly suspicious because of its growing distrust. Thus, for him "Rich gets away with what those poets no longer can. By the sheer excessiveness of 'burning' cores, 'glowing' arteries, and 'sacred' mountains, Rich strives to appropriate, as Foucault would have it, both the authority of Elizabethan love poems and the validity of their social contract" (41).

Rich's intense *struggle for clarity* (my italics), as Oktenberg defines it, is constantly confirmed as she bases her search both on the intellectual effort of the mind, and on the intensity of passion. For Oktenberg, Rich's "quest for intellectual clarity, the naming and placing of it in the larger cultural, historical, or planetary context, remains 'hard,' 'cerebral,' lumped, incomplete, unless passionate linkage can be made—and made to hold" (335). This larger, planetary context is backdrop of poem XII—the two lovers inhabit this multifaceted environment, and their "passionate linkage" is closely connected to it:

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep:
the dream-ghosts of two worlds
walking their ghost-towns, almost address each other.
I've wakened to your muttered words
spoken light- or dark-years away
as if my own voice had spoken.

But we have different voices, even in sleep,
and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
is freighted with different language, different meanings—
though is any chronicle of the world we share
it could be written with new meaning
we were two lovers of one gender,
we were two women of one generation.
(82)

Although they are connected to this larger context, the distinctive nature of their existence detaches them from the legacy of the past. The past stories they have inherited are "freighted with different language, different meanings"—these are the patriarchal stories that have been told for centuries, ignoring the existence of "lovers of one gender." Even having different voices, the two lovers could establish a new meaning in any record of the world they participate: "we were two lovers of one gender, / we were two women of one generation." By stepping forward, and becoming visible Rich places her narrative outside, and against the biased, patriarchal stories she sets to revise. As Oktenberg states, one of the main dichotomies of patriarchal thinking—"the notion of lover as subject, beloved as object, and merger as unattainable ideal" (336)—is discarded as worthless to them. The two lovers that come from the same generation, and share the same gender cannot exist within the patriarchal model of complementary association.

Whitman's model of love also goes in the same direction of a democratic, reciprocal partnership, and is equally against patriarchal orientation. More than that, Whitman's opposition to patriarchy was the basis of his thesis in *Democratic Vistas*. For Martin, Whitman "seems to have believed, like Melville in *Typee*, that heterosexuality was the sexual expression of capitalism and of a society based on property. Homosexuality was for him the sexual expression of community, and would follow necessarily in a true socialist society" (84). This is certainly one of the most important views shared by Whitman and

Rich—the idea that love should be an expression and an extension of democracy, that ownership and hierarchy cannot be a part of genuine love relationships (not only homosexual ones). Because of this, patriarchal institutions need to be challenged somehow.

Hence, in order to rewrite the "charted systems" alluded to in the beginning of poem XIII, the two lovers have to rely on the power of their imagination to create new standards, new rules once "the maps they gave us were out of date / by years." The female roles present in those maps—passiveness, self-effacement, denial, and resignation—are no longer accepted as valid models. As Oktenberg says, the patriarchal models are useless to them, so they "use the only maps available, their own minds and passions" (336). The other alternative, lesbian existence, is a "country that has no language / no laws." Because it is a condition that has been systematically repressed, with almost no records whatsoever, it leaves no references to follow:

The rules break like thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out of date
by years … we're driving through the desert
wondering if the water will hold out
the hallucinations turn to simple villages
the music on the radio comes clear—
neither *Rosenkavalier* nor *Götterdämmerung*
but a woman's voice singing old songs
with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
plucked and fingered by women outside the law.
(82)

Imagination, the same agent that, according to Paz, triggers the erotic impulse in us, becomes their sole instrument during their journey. In her essayistic book *What Is Found There*, providing numerous answers to the question "what does a poet need to know"? Rich

states that "[w]e must use what we have to invent what we desire" (215). And what they have on their side—the only thing that is available—is their imagination. Thus, as they walk through "gorges unexplored since dawn," a new language, and new rules have to be invented daily. In the face of this complete absence of models, the speaker says: "whatever we do together is pure invention."

For Oktenberg, as outsiders of patriarchal system, the two lovers "have no reason to obey, or even to recognize, its rules" (334). Even driving through deserts, fighting hallucinations, the message in the music they hear is clear—no more the grandiloquence, and the tragedy of opera, but a woman's voice "singing old songs / with new words"—the song of women "outside the law." No more the tragedy that has characterized stories about women so far, but reinvention out of what they have at hand.

Yet, the necessity, and the anguish to survive within a heterosexist culture that utterly ignores their presence are revealed in poem XIV. The journey taken by the two lovers on an excruciating boat trip, surrounded by the *incontestable* legitimacy of "honeymoon couples" who exert their silent authority over the two lovers is an effective metaphor to represent their marginality—while the heterosexual couples embrace each other openly to look for comfort, and assurance, they have to establish alternative modes of physical, and emotional links once they are in a public space:

It was your vision of the pilot
confirmed my vision of you: you said, *He keeps*
on steering headlong into the waves, on purpose
while we crouched in the open hatchway
vomiting into plastic bags
for three hours between St. Pierre and Miquelon.
I never felt closer to you.
In the close cabin where the honeymoon couples
huddled in each other's laps and arms
I put my hand on your tight
to comfort both of us, your hand came over mine,

we stayed that way, suffering together
in our bodies, as if all suffering
were physical, we touched so in the presence
of strangers who knew nothing and cared less
vomiting their private pain
as if all suffering were physical.
(83)

It is precisely in this situation of helplessness, of "vomiting into plastic bags" all their sorrow that the speaker is able to feel closer to her lover as never before. The grotesque replaces the romanticism typical of sonnets. They touch so in the presence of strangers, but their touching is somehow furtive, clandestine, reassuring rather than erotic. In order to comfort both of them, a new system of exchange, even if precarious, has to be generated. And yet, they manage to suffer together "in [their] bodies," knowing that not all suffering is physical. The speaker is referring to another kind of pain here—this is the pain of existing, the pain that comes from bigotry, intolerance, insensitivity. The honeymoon couples, seemingly unaware of this other kind of pain, and unaware of their indifference to the lovers, sit "vomiting their private pain / as if all suffering were physical."

Contrasting the economy, and precariousness of the lover's touching of the previous poem, THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED brings an exuberance of erotic details that somehow neutralizes the sterility of this passage. In fact, the poem could be seen as a sort of floating signifier that, because unnumbered, unbound, could travel across the whole sequence haunting it with new meanings. The limitless erotic possibilities it suggests, and the mutual recognition between the two lovers it testifies permeate all other poems:

Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine—tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun. Your traveled, generous thighs
between which my whole face has come and come—
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—

the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
reaching where I had been waiting years for you
in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is.
(83)

According to Dickie, the passage is "the only erotic moment in the sequence, which is announced as a haunting of the body, imagined as memory as soon as it is concluded." As in previous instances, she believes the ghostly is present here, too—the line "whatever happens, this is" is understood as a reminder of the transient character of this erotic experience, lacking power once it is addressed as past. Moreover, Dickie claims that:

> the words seem more than superfluous, destroying the moment in favor of some announced future possession of it. The repetition of "Whatever happens" underscores a peculiar hollowing out of the present happening, an obsessive attachment to the future, a denial of the present or perhaps an eagerness to haunt the present moment with the future. (152)

Dickie also questions Rich's "appropriative gesture" in the line: "your touch on me, firm, protective, searching / me out"—her question is "how is it different from its heterosexual version? Has Rich rendered ghostly the 'firm, protective, searching' male in appropriating his role?" Moreover, she believes that the language here "is borrowed, not new, and it blurs the distinction between same-sex sex and different-sex sex in a way that Rich disclaims in commenting on her lesbian poetry" (153). In Joanne Feit Diehl's perception, "helpful as sexual truth-telling may be, however, it does not resolve the problem these poems so starkly articulate: the difficulty of reinventing names for experience, of placing the female self at the center of the mimetic process" (in Dickie 153).

Commenting on the limitations of language to poets, Rich has said in *What is Found There* that " to track your own desire, in your own language, is not an isolated task. You yourself are marked by family, gender, caste, landscape, the struggle to make a living, or

the absence of such a struggle. The rich and the poor are equally marked. Poetry is never free of these markings even when it appears to be. Look into the images." A poet cannot work in separation from his/her surroundings, and language will be always contaminated, or influenced by what is around. As Rich says: "we cannot work in isolation, or in fear of other voices" (216).

What Dickie fails to apprehend behind the words she regards as "more than superfluous" is the experimental, freeing character of the erotic experience the poem illustrates. Sex is seen as a form of knowledge that facilitates the mutual recognition of the two lovers on bases that are fundamentally anti-patriarchal. The erotic is experienced simultaneously with the sharing of innocence and wisdom, an intended transgression that opposes the view of lesbian existence as a mere physical act. The lover's caresses are searching and protective at the same time, sex is not an end in itself, but a way to mutual knowledge. As Rich puts it, lesbian experience is, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience. The line "whatever happens," then, assumes a new meaning—despite all the tribulations that may come to them, the two lovers can always return to each other, as if their love were a shelter. The gift of their physical intimacy becomes a continuous source of strength and inspiration.

In her "Review of *The Dream of a Common Language*," Olga Broumas argues that THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED discusses not only the question of physical intimacy, but also "the place of physical intimacy" in a loving human relationship. For her, it is not "the physical which defines this relationship as lesbian, but the absolute and primary attention directed to the other. Sisterhood—that is, primary and bonding love from women—is … a capacity, not a destiny." These female attachments are the product of

choice, and sex, something that requires "the least will, floats, unnumbered, informing the sequence the way a canvas is painted in a certain light, but is not about the light" (326).

In fact, what Dickie regards as ghostly, or as a denial of the present, Oktenberg defines as a political attitude that marks the lovers' conscious position outside patriarchal norms. Once outside, "they float, unnumbered, in a world of anchored numbers" (334). The absence of a number to identify the poem, then, is also a political strategy to signal the deletion of lesbian existence from public spheres—in a patriarchal perspective, homosexual intercourse, though said to exist, is not fully acknowledged as a conceivable alternative. It can only be a floating number that has no right for expression, no anchors, and certainly no place in any *official* record of history.

The silent violence that is directed against the lovers is explored in varied manners and settings. Poem XV demonstrates how social hostility can sneak even in an apparently peaceful situation—the metaphor of the "fine sand" that forces the lovers to abandon the calm beach they are laying on illustrates the patriarchal belligerence that will continuously deprive them of basic civil liberties, such as the right to be visible. Although the force that is being exerted on the two lovers may seem, at first sight, unintended, it *is* there and demands a reaction by them:

If I lay on the beach with you
white, empty, pure green water warmed by the Gulf Stream
and lying on that beach we could not stay
because the wind drove fine sand against us—
as if it were against us
if we tried to withstand it and we failed—
if we drove to another place
to sleep in each other's arms
and the beds were narrow like prisoner's cots
and we were tired and did not sleep together
and this was what we found, so this is what we did—
was the failure ours?
If I cling to circumstances I could feel

not responsible. Only she who says
she did not choose, is the loser in the end.
(83-84)

They have to move to another place to sleep in each other's arms once the action could have never been done publicly on the beach. But even driving to another place, they have to sleep in narrow beds "like prisoner's cots"—the space that is *destined* to them is small, uncomfortable, and unsuitable. Because of that, they have to sleep apart, and this is another example on how the outside world can interfere in their private life. Interestingly, the closet here works as an exact opposite to what we find in Whitman's poems. If in "Calamus" the open spaces always function as closets, and the characters find in the wilderness a space for freedom, in Rich's poem XV the open spaces do not offer any shelter to the two lovers. They have to leave the beach they are in and go to a small room in order to comfort each other.

The lines "and this is what we found, / so this is what we did— / was the failure ours?" also contrast with Dickie's assertion about the evasion of the speaker, and her continuous transference to a future time. It is not the speaker's choice to be ghostly, evasive, but rather a social imposition they have to deal with. It is precisely the patriarchal apparatus that demands them to be invisible. But even in a situation in which one cannot feel responsible, there is choice, and there is a reaction: "Only she who says / she did not choose, / is the loser in the end." As Oktenberg says, "[n]o fatal or foredoomed flaw, but mortal choice and responsibility, determines the course of their love" (336). In spite of the circumstances, there is no passive acceptance of suffering, and tragedy.

Physical intimacy reappears in poem XVI. In fact, the poem could be said to bring "an erotics of intimacy" in its evocation of their relationship through the objects that are

described. Intimacy here emerges in the routine of the two lovers, their daily life, their belongings that are lying together in the dressing table, the music they hear when they are alone. All these details compose a depiction of the relationship as a loving partnership. The poem also brings a series of paradoxes that sometimes introduce a crisis in the scene. The first paradox has a positive meaning—even being apart from her lover, the speaker feels they are connected, sharing a permanent bond that never ceases to exist. The next paradoxes have a negative connotation. The island of Manhattan where they live is wide and narrow at the same time—it is wide in its dimensions, in its varied character, but narrow in its restrictions to them:

Across a city from you, I'm with you,
just as an August night
moony, inlet-warm, seabathed, I watched you sleep,
the scrubbed, sheenless wood of the dressing table
cluttered with our brushes, books, vials in the moonlight—
or a salt-mist orchard, lying at your side
watching red sunset through the screendoor of the cabin,
G minor Mozart on the tape recorder,
falling asleep to the music of the sea.
This island of Manhattan is wide enough
for both of us, and narrow:
I can hear your breath tonight, I know how your face
lies upturned, the halflight tracing
your generous, delicate mouth
where grief and laughter sleep together.
(84)

The biggest paradox lies in her lover's mouth where "grief and laughter sleep together." The outside world is a permanent interference, and its hostility toward them, even when they are at home, is present. Nonetheless, there is choice, and there is responsibility, in spite of the harsh conditions. As poem XVII says: "No one's fated or doomed to love anyone"—lesbian existence is not seen as a fate, or doom. For the speaker, it is an accident, like a car crash, it simply happens. As Oktenberg says, the lovers in the

Poems are "not human beings divided eternally by rigid categories of difference, but individuals linked by circumstance and choice" (336):

No one's fated or doomed to love anyone.
The accidents happen, we're not heroines,
they happen in our lives like car crashes,
books that change us, neighborhoods
we move into and come to love.
Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story,
women at least should know the difference
between love and death. No poison cup,
no penance. Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
not merely played but should have listened to us,
and could instruct those after us:
this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
within us and against us, against us and within us.
(84)

According to Oktenberg, the "familiar structure of romantic tragedy is explicitly rejected. No fate but accident brings the lovers together." Their story has hardly the same plot of traditional love stories in which human responsibility is disavowed in favor of destiny, or, as in "*Tristan und Isolde,"* a love potion that dooms the lovers eternally. The climax of the Poems, then, "provides no spectacle of disaster" (336)—there is no "poison cup, / no penance" that can substantiate their fate. In order to take pulse of their lives, women "at least should know the difference / between love and death."

In spite of that, these women are "not heroines," but ordinary people who have decided to be responsible for their lives. Addressing the subject, Yorke has shown how Rich, through the incorporation of the idea of a "common woman," has strengthened the political relations she wants to challenge. Yorke says that: "Not wishing to idealise or romanticise, Rich, in this gesture towards materialist feminism, celebrates the 'common woman,' and eschews the temptation to valorise extraordinary or uncommon women." The

lovers in the "Poems" could be said to partake many traces with the idea of a "common woman"—their ordinary life of books, domestic chores, the smile that contains both "grief and laughter," all details that make them regular beings, and not romantic heroines. Additionally, Yorke states that in "[d]efining 'common' in constructivist terms as an *intersection* of 'oppression and strength, damage and beauty,' Rich constructs a contradictory 'identity' for 'common' women, and so her 'ordinary' women occupy a temporal and spatial *position* within language" (87). By representing her "common woman" as a complex, contradictory, and at the same time ordinary being, and by placing this model within language, Rich establishes and validates new political grounds for women. Later on, Rich would be accused for many critics of creating a "universalizing metaphor" that could not be applied to all women. The charges of essentialism against her will be dealt in detail in my concluding chapter.

The final lines of poem XVII suggest that the women of the future would be better off having a guide to follow, one that would instruct them to avoid the same mistakes, and the same attitudes of their ancestors. Hence, the tape recorder—as if it were a witness of the two lover's story—should leave a record of their enterprise: "that tape-recorder not merely played but should have listened to us, / and could instruct those after us." It could teach future women that it is about time to stop self-censorship, self-torture which has characterized female story so far: "and these are the forces they have ranged against us, / and these are the forces we have ranged within us." Commenting on the restrains faced by women poets, Dickie states that Rich has noted on her work "the self-censorship that women poets have practiced and the external censorship that they have suffered. The two have a complicated and historically variable relationship, despite Rich's conflation of the two in women's persistent encoding of their feelings" (146).

In fact, there is no encoded message in the "Twenty-One Love Poems," but a clear attempt to clarify, and renew women's story in a way that the past models—such as martyrdom and abnegation—can be overcome. However, the shadow of a rupture between the two lovers that permeates part of the "Poems" becomes more evident in poem XVIII. Despite their love for each other, these women react differently in the face of the impediments posited against them by a society that utterly rejects their existence. Little by little, the speaker's lover starts to distance herself from this troubled existence, as if "in fugue" of some danger she cannot comprehend. The cloudy atmosphere on the first lines of the poem introduces the crisis that is extended in the subsequent poems:

Rain on the West Side Highway,
red light at Riverside:
the more I live the more I think
two people together is a miracle.
You're telling the story of your life
for once, a tremor breaks the surface of your words.
The story of our lives becomes our lives.
Now you're in fugue across what some I'm sure
Victorian poet called the *salt estranging sea.*
Those are the words that come to my mind.
I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn
pushing toward daybreak. Something: a cleft of light—?
Close between grief and anger, a space opens
where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder.
(85)

Given all the pressure they face, it is comprehensible that a rupture could take place. As the speaker says: "*two people together is a miracle*"—and in their case, the effort to make it would certainly demand a massive effort to oppose a whole apparatus that constantly obliterates them. As her lover starts to get distant, a space that is "[c]lose between grief and anger" opens between them, and the speaker is left alone. It is significant that Rich uses her own name in the "Poems." In "To a Common Prostitute" Whitman also makes use of his own name to address the woman in the title: "Be composed—be at ease

with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature." In the daring act of naming themselves in the poems, and in their refusal to mask their identity, both poets mark a firm political position against the heterosexual bias. Referring to "Calamus," Robert K. Martin says that the poems were not a mere autobiographical account of Whitman's life, but instead they were fictional, or "an artful arrangement" of his life. In Rich's case, we too have a "dramatized version" of her recognition and defense of her homosexual condition. But more than that, the "Poems" may be seen as a lucid account of Rich's firm intent of addressing the world from a female perspective.

Poem XIX somehow counteracts the statement about the miracle of two people together as it vehemently states that, in fact, "*there are no miracles*"—the only thing that exists is the power of imagination, and the firm intention to build a relationship in spite of all obstacles they might face. The speaker says she begins "to touch [herself] again," as a sign of crisis in the lover's intimacy, once a cause for joy and understanding, and now vulnerable to the external pressures:

Can it be growing colder when I begin
to touch myself again, adhesions pull away?
When slowly the naked face turns from staring backward
and looks into the present,
the eye of winter, city, anger, poverty, and death
and the lips part and say: *I mean to go on living*?
Am I speaking coldly when I tell you in a dream
or in this poem, *There are no miracles*?
(I told you from the first I wanted daily life,
this island of Manhattan was island enough for me.)
If I could let you know—
two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness,
the slow-picked, halting traverse of a pitch
where the fiercest attention becomes routine
—look at the faces of those who have chosen it.
(85)

The speaker decides to stop looking into the past for answers. As she says: "When slowly the naked face turns from staring backward / and looks into the present" one has to face the spitefulness of the surroundings—but could she continue living in spite of all the poverty, death, and hunger? And yet, her sharp perception has led her to know that "two women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple"—there is no effortless alternative, but the intellectual effort to step out of these rules and create new ones. As the speaker says: "I told you from the first I wanted daily life." No more self-censorship and oppression, no underground life of shame and secrets, but the hard, cerebral task of creating ordinary life within repression. For Oktenberg, this is "an effort of supreme will," one that demands, as the poem says, the "fiercest attention." And the look of those engaged in this task is thus transformed by its demands—"look at the faces of those who have chosen it." In the end, the faces have become "beatified not only by love, but also by the intense intellectual work in which they are involved" (335).

Nonetheless, the splitting of the couple is, in some way, inevitable. In spite of the bond that once has united them, they are not capable of finding a common ground on which to stand, and communication is thus interrupted. The words that could solve their dilemma were never uttered—"That conversation we were always on the edge / of having, runs on in my head." The metaphor of the polluted water of Hudson River that, in spite of its wreck, can still reflect the moon suggests that beauty can still be found amidst ruins:

That conversation we were always on the edge
of having, runs on in my head,
at night the Hudson trembles in New Jersey light
polluted water yet reflecting even
sometimes the moon
and I discern a woman
I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat

and choking her like hair. And this is she
with whom I tried to speak, whose hurt, expressive head
turning aside from pain, is dragged down deeper
where it cannot hear me,
and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul.
(85-86)

The speaker's lover, already addressed in the past, is the image of a woman "drowning in secrets, / fear wound round her throat / and choking her like hair." The "drowned things" that live in her silence, mentioned on poem IX, take over. Understanding becomes impossible, and the speaker realizes that the woman she once tried to speak is someone whose "expressive head / turning aside from pain, / is dragged down deeper / where it cannot hear me." The outside contradictions that once surrounded their relationship become more and more visible from *within*—as Oktenberg states: "[t]wo women who are lovers in heterosexist society live with contradictions embedded in their most intimate thoughts and feelings. What they experience as beautiful, and as absolute natural, the rest of society views as ugly and perverted" (334).

The final poem, poem XXI, somehow celebrates the speaker's determination in pursuing a new attitude, a firm intent in imagining what she desires, even if sadness and separation occur. The poem suggests that it is in the mind that transformation can be possible, and again there is a refusal to accept sacrifice and resignation. The circle imagined by the speaker, a strategic position to represent her awareness, is "not Stonehenge"—this is not a sacrificial space, but a symbolic position in her own mind to mark her striving for clarity:

The dark lintels, the blue and foreign stones
of the great round rippled by stone implements
the midsummer night rising from beneath
the horizon—when I said "a cleft of light"
I meant this. And this is not Stonehenge

simply nor any place but the mind
casting back to where her solitude,
shared, could be chosen without loneliness,
not easily nor without pains to stake out
the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light.
I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.
(86)

This position of awareness represented by the circle is not one of security, or comfort, but an attitude of courage. This awareness is to be achieved "not easily nor without pains to stake out / the circle." Whitman, by the same token, says in "In Paths Untrodden" he is "Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly / attachment"—breaking the rules will be always an act of courage. In spite of the difficulties, the speaker in Rich´s poem chooses to be visible—"I choose to be a figure in that light"—even if she might be sometimes "half-blotted by darkness," she strongly delimits her position as doer, refusing martyrdom, and despair. Dickie has opted to see this final image as retreat, and not as a fighting attitude. In her opinion, the speaker in the last poem "acknowledges herself, if not as a ghost, then as a figure shimmering in both the light and the darkness" (152). Obviously, as the speaker decides to be visible, and to fight she eventually will face retaliation, repression, and violence. The darkness she mentions refers to the patriarchal intolerance in the face of her daring attitude, but within her fortress, the circle of light she has made, this darkness is cast off.

The image of the circle can still evoke other, more intricate analogies. According to Helena Michie "[t]he private and privatized vision that 'Twenty-One Love Poems' ends with posits a safe space for the self within the image of the circle; the very word 'circle,' however, reminds us, indeed compels us, to go back to the beginning of the poem, to read

circularly" (in Dickie 154). Thus, as Michie says, the reader is stimulated to see the poem as "an invitation to reread"—the circularity of the "Poems" is then established as desire is repeatedly re-enacted. In fact, the mobile character of Rich's text is also suggested by THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED, a poem that circulates throughout the entirety of the text, thus altering experience continuously.

Oktenberg has also tackled the circular character of Rich's text. In his view, the "Poems" are appealing not only as a source of beauty and inspiration we can go back continuously, but also for their revisionist, feminist character. According to him, Rich's poems:

> are *feminist* in that they are woman-identified; they acknowledge, define and explore one set of the possibilities of love between women; they recognize the connection, the primary bond, between women as a source of integrity and strength. They are also *radically* feminist in that they constitute a critique, a re-vision, of patriarchal notions of love. (342)

Even if the love relationship had to end, the "Poems" are still a source of "clues and insights" into the pressing necessity of imagining alternative, non-authoritarian forms of loving. As Oktenberg states: "That the struggle ended in failure—at least in terms of the longevity of the love relationship described in the poems—is also instructive and of use to us. The struggle against patriarchy is an essential one; the 'Twenty-One Love Poems' are a new labyris—and a banner of continuing beauty—for all those engaged in it" (342).

Interestingly, the two literary works analyzed here—"Calamus," and the "Twenty-One Love Poems"—echo each other in their attempt at reinventing desire, in their reliance on imagination, and in their belief that a democratic partnership between two subjects is possible, and necessary. I would like to conclude this study with a dialogue between the ideas about eroticism presented on Chapter I, and the outcome of the poems discussed in the subsequent chapters. If Paz is right in saying that poetry is "an eroticism of language,"

then it seems logical to see how both poets, given the conditions they had, negotiated with all restraints they certainly encountered, including the limitations of language.

CONCLUSION

For the Greek, Eros had an unquestionable initiatory role. The entity was intrinsically related to one's adulthood—especially for the younger ones as it represented the beginning of maturity and social life—but it was also a matter of concern for the elders since its abuse would signify a morally weak character. Additionally, the nobler form of love, and the one under heavy surveillance, was the one related to male love. Looking at the erotic depictions created by Whitman and Rich, one sees a similar connection between eroticism and initiation. The search for self-knowledge, the path to maturity and spiritual growth, and the rejection of patriarchal standards of behavior develop out of the full recognition of homoeroticism for both poets.

In "In Paths Untrodden," Whitman's move from the "standards hitherto publish'd" can only be fully achieved when his songs to manly love become a primary activity for the speaker. Initiation here goes in the opposite direction from the Greek model though—instead of promoting social belonging and stability, it demands a move away from social arrangements and institutions. The kind of emancipation his songs to manly attachment bring cannot be placed within patriarchal parameters. In spite of that, this initiation is significant enough for the speaker to feel "[n]o longer abash'd." Even set in a secluded spot, this new perception speaks of a life that "contains all the rest."

The move away from the social environment is a recurring theme in "Calamus" as a whole. As Pollak says, isolation and loneliness for Whitman are the product of life in the city rather than attributes of natural habitats. The rewards of capitalist society such as material possessions and social success are also discarded. In "When I Heard at the Close

of the Day" we see the poet's indifference to fame and social glories. Personal satisfaction and happiness can only be achieved through the complete reliance on comradeship and the repudiation of social masquerade. Sheer isolation, however, is a source of anguish for the poet. In "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," the absence of communication and physical contact becomes an impediment for the speaker's joy. In a sense, erotic initiation—the breaking up with social conventions—can bring satisfaction and fulfillment, but also anxiety and frustration.

Initiation in Rich's case also follow a similar pattern—because disloyal to civilization, the "women outside the law" in Poem XIII can never fit the established social order. Quite the opposite: they have to break it, to reinvent it, and overcome it. If homoeroticism does not promote social belonging, it is responsible for the mutual recognition and exchange between the two partners in ways that are foreign to patriarchal eroticism. In THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED, the lovemaking between the two lovers becomes a force capable of challenging even the harshest conditions. Just as in Whitman's case, the necessary strength to break the social impediments that annihilate the subject must come from unrestricted and democratic love. As the speaker says: "whatever happens, this is"—bigotry is overcome through physical intimacy and support. Hence, Rich's final poem, Poem XXI somehow celebrates a position of marginality, but one characterized by choice, historical awareness, and responsibility. The poem suggests that once someone has been "initiated," there is no way back to one's previous position: "I choose to walk here. / And to draw this circle."

Some of Paz's main ideas underlie many of the poems discussed in this study. Both Whitman and Rich create images out of an "eroticism of language"—in "Scented Herbage of my Breast" Whitman's choice of words make reference to the male body in varied and

unexpected ways. The association of the phallus with the leaves that "[grow] up above [him]" create a language that is both erotic and innovative. In "These I Singing in Spring," Whitman introduces the "calamus-root" that becomes the token of manly love, one that is passed around amidst his comrades. Whitman succeeds in representing and renewing images of the male body in poetry—not only the leaves, roots, and plants make reference to phallic characteristics, but nature itself partakes male attributes such as strength, determination, boldness, and lust. Like nature and bodies, language is eroticized.

The images and language in Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" are equally erotic. Eroticism lies in the intimacy shared by the couple, their common life together, and in the subtlety of small details such as the descriptions of the hands of the speaker's lover in Poem VI: "Your small hands, precisely equal to my own— / only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands / I could trust the world," and in Poem XI: "I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path, / to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp." Because it is recognized as an instrument of self-knowledge, and because it can permeate other areas on human life (not only the sexual one), eroticism here mingles with apparent ordinary situations, promoting personal growth, strength, and interchange. Moreover, physical intimacy and support become instruments of social change.

In other instances, such as Poem I, Rich uses an erotic language that is more extreme. In order to present the setting of her "Poems," and also to create the atmosphere of hazard in which lesbian existence is confined, she introduces the theme of pornography, science-fiction vampires, and the "red begonia perilously flashing / from a tenement six stories high, / or the long-legged young girls playing ball / in the junior highschool playground." In fact, the scene evokes the distortion of eroticism, the grotesque side of it, and this is the kind of imagery the poet wants to defy—as Lorde says, pornography is the

exact opposite of eroticism as it proclaims sensation without feeling. Although there is a certain degree of variation in representations of pornography, the images created invariably follow the same pattern, and they all aim at a similar objective. Eroticism, by its turn, has the power to stimulate an uncountable number of depictions: imagination and intellectual potential, especially when channeled to poetic language, create limitless possibilities.

Although in Whitman the poetic language is characterized by an abundance of erotic imagery, the male lovers in "Calamus," as seen before, are not described in actual sexual terms. The physical intimacy in "Calamus" is one of kisses, embraces, and hands that hold. Rich's FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED, however, brings a description of a pungent sexual encounter which is unmistakably homosexual: "the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth," and later "your touch on me, firm, protective, searching / me out, your strong tong and slender fingers / reaching where I had been waiting years for you / in my rose-wet cave" If Whitman has chosen the calamus to symbolize the male sexual organ, Rich has chosen a "rose-wet cave" to represent the female one. In its richness of images and unique character, Rich's THE FLOATING POEM could be seen as the other extreme of pornography—the "erotic communion" in it contrasts with the objectivity of pornographic performance. For both poets, then, eroticism is, as Paz proclaims, an absolute act of imagination, one that surpasses social limitations, intolerance, and cowardice—this is a constant reinvention of desire.

Comparing traditional erotic depictions, especially the ones advocating male supremacy and female passivity, with the representations created by Whitman and Rich one sees a clear rupture with patriarchal conventions. Bataille's categorization of the sexes—his idea that the dissolution during orgasm necessarily presupposes the existence of an active partner (generally the male), and a passive, female one that is "dissolved" is fully

discarded. In their reliance on intersubjectivity, the full coexistence of two complete beings that interrelate, both poets have confronted the narrowness of complementary love relations. Whitman's firm belief in democratic partnerships naturally excludes any kind of hierarchy among lovers. In "For You O Democracy," the poet attempts to "make the continent indissoluble" solely with "the love of comrades, / With the life-long love of comrades," and in "Among the Multitude," out of a fleeting sexual experience, he finds a "lover and perfect equal"—egalitarianism is the founding element in Whitman's sexual politics.

Going in the same direction, Rich also questions the existence of active / passive partners in human sexuality. Complementary associations cannot fit her idea that female comradeship, support, and the sharing of joy and work reconfigure lesbian existence. The lovemaking described in THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED is one of reciprocity, mutuality, and absence of fixed roles—both partners touch and are touched, caress and are caressed, search and are searched. If someone has to be "dissolved" during dissolution for the fusion to happen, then Rich's poem proclaims that both partners shall perform it. None of the lovers imposes their will on each other, and no one has to be bent—action and surrender comes from both sides.

In fact, both Whitman and Rich do not negotiate their desire with the morals and institutions of Western civilization—there is no conformity to the standards, but a breaking up of established rules. In "I Hear It Was Charged Against Me" Whitman makes explicit his complete indifference to institutions, rules, and trustees—his "institution of the dear love of comrades" though, is one of democracy, and freedom. Rich, by her turn, proclaims herself disloyal to civilization, thus revising and reinventing its rules. The "women outside the law" that break the rules "like thermometer" (Poem XIII) defy the very system that

oppresses them. Paz's belief that imagination is a key element in eroticism tallies with both poetic works analyzed here. Imagination becomes not only a channel for the flowing of desire, but also a mechanism for defiance, disobedience, and survival.

Whitman's politics of democracy has also led him to assume a defying position in regard to women. His belief in social equality and interchange allowed him to look at female figures from a position outside patriarchal norms. In *Democratic Vistas*, he states that "[t]he day is coming when deep questions of woman's entrance amid the arenas of practical life, politics, and suffrage, etc., will not only be argued all around us, but may be put to decision, and real experiment" (356). In spite of that, the female only appears in "Calamus" associated to feelings or concepts, such as in "For You O Democracy" where democracy is a *femme* the poet serves submissively. As Martin says, because Whitman does not address women as sexual objects, he is free to look at them with compassion, in a broader perspective, especially the ones under strong pressure, as the woman he talks to in "To a Common Prostitute."

For Martin, women are not treated as sexual objects even in Whitman's explicitly heterosexual poems. The best example of that is certainly Section 11 of "Song of Myself"—the poem develops around the image of a woman who, hiding behind the curtain of her window, admires twenty-eight men who are bathing by the shore. The poem is highly erotic in its descriptions, although the woman, the twenty-ninth bather, remains motionless, secretly admiring the men who are unaware of her presence. All the erotic appeal of the poem is directed toward the men, while the woman remains an anonymous spectator throughout the poem:

> Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
> Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly,
> Twenty-eight years of womanly life, and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank.
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? For I see you,
You splash in the water, yet stay stock still in your room (41).

Although the woman described seems an independent, well-off person—she owns a fine house near the river, and she hides "handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window"—she is portrayed as a lonely, repressed figure. All that she can do is to gaze at the men anonymously, but nothing really happens (except maybe in her imagination). She "[splashes] in the water, yet [stays] stock still in [her] room." The poet is obviously sympathetic towards her, as if aware of the same kind of limitation, the same impossibility to erotic / sexual fulfillment—"Where are you off to lady? For I see you." He *sees* the woman's situation, and he can understand and share her clandestine rapture:

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams passed all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passed over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies swell to the sun … they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray (42).

Three different actions are being performed in the poem, and the speaker—probably a man—has access to all. Pollak speaks of the "triangulation" of the poem, a scheme where the act of gazing has a central importance:

> the poet / speaker watches a desiring woman who watches the floating, bulging men; the mutuality of the gaze is frustrated, doubly frustrated. Just as the twenty-eight young men are completely unaware of being observed, let alone "seize[d] fast" by the woman's longing, so too the love-starved woman whom they "souse with spray" is completely unaware of the speaker who voyeuristically watches her. The anonymous mode prevails, as does unrealization. (93)

Ironically, if the homoerotic relations present in "Calamus" do not include explicitly sexual, physical contact, the action in Section 11 of "Song of Myself" is undoubtedly a reference to group sex, in spite of the anonymous, imaginative character of the scene. The woman desires the men fervidly, but they, unaware of her presence, do not desire her back. It is Pollak's claim that erotic anonymity is a constant theme in "Song of Myself," and the speaker's sexual adventures a need "to be in control, as fear of exploitation coincide with fears of being exploited—even in the male-homoerotic relationships that are later praised, in 1860, for their democratic potential (91).

Alternatively, one may see the gaze in the poem as doubly accomplished. Eroticism is enhanced by the presence of two silent voyeurs—the poet sharing the woman's gaze. To speak of "unrealization" here would be to underestimate the power of the imagination Paz refers to. In fact, the intensity of voyeurism / imagination leads to physical orgasm—"they do not know who puffs and declines with pendant / and bending arch / they do not think whom they souse with spray." The passage suggestively implies the complicity of the poet in the orgasm (be it actually physical or only imaginatively physical). Moreover, Pollak's claim of the anonymous mode in Whitman's poem can be questioned once in voyeurism

(and in eroticism) reciprocity, if desired, can be imagined—as Rich says, we have to *imagine what we desire* (my italics).

Martin also sees the anonymous character of the poem as a positive, recurring trace in Whitman's erotic depictions. In Section 11 of "Song of Myself" he believes Whitman has achieved "the feat of being both subject and object, of being the female voyeur as well as the men who are masturbated" (19). According to him, Whitman defended anonymity as an important element in sexual experiences, and Section 11 is an allegory of that—"not asking, not knowing, and not thinking are integral parts of Whitman's *democratic* vision, and anonymous sexuality is an important way-station on the path to the abolition of distinctions of age, class, beauty, and gender." Moreover, since we are talking about the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (the homosexual love poems of the 1860 edition had not come about), Martin claims that Whitman had to rely on "the device of the female point of view in order to present an essentially homosexual vision." Yet, the woman in the poem is not a mere cover for Whitman's homosexual vision as he "seems to have sensed the relationship between the thwarted desires of women and those of homosexual men, for the homosexual in mid-nineteenth-century America was also obliged to look at life from 'aft the blinds,' secretly glimpsing the desired bodies of young men." Indeed, Whitman's vision is not only "essentially homosexual" but also in communion with the female perspective of heterosexual desire. Hence, as a homosexual man, he is able to understand "the repressed sexuality of Victorian women" (20). Paraphrasing Lorde's words, Whitman has not used the woman's feelings "as we use a Kleenex," rather he shares the power of her tortured, difficult feelings once he is aware of the similarities between their oppressed social situation. Finally, the poem also subversively celebrates the communion of the poet's desire with the woman's—they obviously share much more than their social oppression.

The pattern of sexual anonymity as a way to democracy devised by Martin also goes against Pollak's claim that the speaker in Section 11 needs to be always in control, a typical characteristic of "the conventional rivalries of male gendering." Moreover, for Pollak "the rivalry that emerges as a key component of male bonding for the Whitmanian subject remains an obstacle to love in other poems of the 'Calamus' sequence. Sentimental reverie provides a buffer against such rivalry but ultimately proves insufficient" (136). If we consider the speaker in "Whoever You Are Holding Me by the Hand" and his necessity to establish the conditions for the meeting with his possible lover, or the poet's necessity to instruct his future readers / critics on the way he should be read in ages to come in "Recorders Ages Hence," Pollak's claim seems to be partly justified. However, in other poems of the sequence, especially those in which sexual anonymity is present, such as in "City of Orgies" and "Among the Multitude," the democratic character of the experiences narrated is most likely to cease any trace of rivalry among men that might exist. As Martin has said, anonymous sex in Whitman breaks up with distinctions of age, class, race, and gender because the poet "loves all being and will love and be loved by all being. It is perhaps at this juncture that the implications of his perspective become most revolutionary" (20).

The kind of criticism Rich has received has to do with supposed essentialist views her poems and theory might have generated. By the early 1980's, soon after her book of poems *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far* was published, some critics started to spot in her ideas, especially in her notion of a "common woman," the possibility of essentialism. The poems gather around the idea that, in Rich's own words, it is a pressing necessity the identification of "the resourceful, heroic coping of ordinary women everywhere" (in Yorke 86). As Yorke has pointed out, Rich's notion is derived from Judy Grahn's definition of the

"Common Woman" as an "intersection of oppression and strength, damage and beauty. It is, quite simply, the *ordinary* in women which will 'rise' in every sense of the word—spiritually and in activism" (in Yorke 86).

For Yorke, critics might have been confused so as to point out the essentialism in Rich's work partly because she often operates through a "characteristic strategy of confounding dualistic thinking." In fact, women are addressed, at the same time, globally (in their universal oppression), and locally (in each woman's specific predicaments). Thus, Yorke says, the 'rising' of ordinary women in Rich's work "is not a definition of 'woman,' but an anticipation of an as yet unrealized potentiality to be developed … an inspirational political focus to gather women's desires and energy towards working for specific local change on a global scale" (86).

The notion of common traits shared by women, the play between local and global policies, and the sense of potentialities to be developed by women permeate the entirety of *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far*—in "Transit," for instance, Rich tells the story of two women who repeatedly meet each other on the street. Interestingly, although these two women seem to be constantly meeting in movement, as the title says, one woman is always in a journey, while the other stands near a fence—without making a bridge that can approximate the two, they shall remain, in spite of the things they have in common, strangers to each other:

> ……..
> And when we pass each other I look into her face
> wondering what we have in common
> where our minds converge
> for we do not pass each other, she passes me
> as I halt beside the fence tangled in snow,
> she passes me as I shall never pass her
> in this life
> ……..

When sisters separate they haunt each other
as she, who I might once have been, haunts me
or is it I who do the haunting
halting and watching on the path
how she appears again through lightly-blowing
crystals, how strong her knees carry her,
how unaware she is, how simple
this is for her, how without let or hindrance
she travels in her body
until the point of passing, where the skier
and the cripple must decide
to recognize each other? (93)

As the poem suggests, women are haunted and will haunt each other through what is common to them. Communication is not easily established though. It is women's task to create bonds that might allow them to really *meet* each other (as the lovers meet in Twenty-One Love Poems)—the *heroic* and the *ordinary* (my italics) in women shall recognize the moment when "the skier / and the cripple must decide / to recognize each other." In "For Memory," Rich makes clear that the path to one's reconciliation and freedom is, just like in her definition of a "common woman," made of hard work and routine, by the extraordinary and the common:

……..
Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark—
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections (94-95).

Reading these poems, the charges of essentialism seem not to fit the main ideas in Rich's work. There is not such a thing as a universal bond that unite all women in the world, but as Yorke says, there is the sharing and the construction of the desire for survival—the freedom mentioned in "For Memory." In Yorke's perception: "survival is the goal, and the process of working towards 'survival' profoundly informs the ground of her

philosophy" (87). Therefore, Yorke concludes, "[g]iven Rich's very strong focus on the global differences between women, on heterogeneity, on cultural and racial diversity, it would be hard to see her as an 'essentialist' writer. Rich does not assume that there is a true, transhistorical essence of being a woman, or of being a lesbian" (88).

"Twenty-One Love Poems" has significant similarities with *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me this Far*—among the potentialities to be developed by women we find not only the lessons from the past that can instruct future generations but also erotic potentialities as sources of intense knowledge. Poem VIII, for instance, celebrates this new woman who recognizes the lessons from the past, but assumes a new attitude: "The woman who cherished / her suffering is dead. I am her descendant. / I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me, / but I want to go on from here with you / fighting the temptation to make a career of pain." Abandoning martyrdom and self-pity, the poet also says on Poem XVII that: "No one's fated or doomed to love anyone. / The accidents happen, we're not heroines." As Yorke says, the "common" trait to these women is their determination to survive, to overcome all the burdens of patriarchal past. In THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED the erotic is portrayed as a source of knowledge and inspiration to women: "the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there." Just as in "Transit," the women here also haunt each other: "Whatever happens with us, your body / will haunt mine." In the process of *working towards survival* (my italics), these women shall continuously return to their shared history, their shared burdens (the global history), but always from the point of their private, unique experience.

As with most aspects in life, the erotic also demands risks to be taken. The erotic has to be acknowledged for the fundamental lessons it might offer. As Lorde argues,

> Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. (8)

Both Whitman and Rich are clearly aware of the necessity of this recognition—their efforts, their work, and their boldness were meant to oppose the narrow, short-sighted views of mainstream eroticism. Nonetheless, the category under study here—eroticism (and its correlates, namely sex, love, and desire)—is not one of final conclusions, and restricted findings. As Belsey points out, writing about desire is, above all, a "project that defies completion." Moreover, she claims that the result and nature of this project "becomes itself an object of desire for the writer" (3). Thus, the necessity to write about eroticism and desire, as seen in this dissertation, has haunted Whitman and Rich intensely. In their case, the desire to write about eroticism comes alongside the necessity to oppose a compulsory system that has utterly ignored diversity, inclusion, and democracy.

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II - Picture 2 - http://www.fetishgallery.com

III - Picture 3 – http://www.crazyxxx3dworld.com

IV - Picture 4 - http://www.getbig.com