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IDEALISM

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Cover art by RUBY YH, a Taiwanese bibliophile and artist who is interested in connections between the non-human natural world and the human race.

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Super Whitman 1855*

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Abstract

This article tracks several thematic, formal, and political confluences between Walt Whitman's poetry and the superhero genre. To that end, I read the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) through the optics of the popular superhero, a staple of US culture that Whitman proleptically announced and whose interpretive frame, I argue, revitalizes Whitman's democratic vision. Whereas this vision has often been dismissed as naïve, if not outright jingoistic, its re-articulation as a superhero narrative opens up a non-complacent democratic culture attentive to deliberation, dialogue, and dissent. For instance, despite Whitman's self-fashioning as a proto-vigilante superhero, his poems evince superheroes' uneasy fit—as extralegal defenders of the law—in a democratic society. After locating this tension between individual and popular sovereignty in political theory, superhero studies, and Whitman's early works and influences, I confirm the democratic usefulness of a superhero-inspired return to Whitman by examining a comics adaptation of *Leaves of Grass*: Robert Sikoryak's *Song of Myself!* (2013). Through an aesthetic borrowed from Marvel's comics of the Silver Age (1956-1969), Sikoryak unearths unexpected connections between Whitman's poetry, superheroes, and a deliberative public sphere—an experimental collision worth considering in light of rising populisms and disaffection.

Keywords

democracy, superhero, Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, deliberation, flesh, Robert Sikoryak

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In 1855, roughly a century before the likes of Superman, Hulk, and the Justice League entered US popular culture, Walt Whitman fashioned a poetic persona endowed with a sense of universal justice, a knack for vigilantism, and numerous superpowers in store. The long untitled poem later to become "Song of Myself" greeted readers by proclaiming the poet's polymorphism: "what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (662).[1] This protean quality owes to an unusual responsiveness ("Mine is no callous shell, / I have instant conductors all over me" [684]), which in turn yields the perceptual gifts of supersight ("I see through the broadcloth and gingham" [667]) and superhearing ("I see and hear the whole" [692]). To this mix, Whitman adds immortality ("I know I am deathless" [677]), gravitation ("I rise extatic through all, and sweep with the true gravitation" [696]), telekinesis ("… call any thing close again when I desire it" [686]), and sizeshifting ("When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he [the poet] easily stretches with them" [618]). These attributes liken Whitman's "self" to the superheroes, monsters, and mutants that populate the Marvel and DC Comics multiverses and which we tend not to expect in an antebellum volume of experimental poetry, much less one devoted to celebrate ordinary Americans.

As it turns out, Super Whitman—my name for this self-construct—is for the people *and* of the people. On the one hand, the poet's omnidirectional vision, his capacity to penetrate private realms and fall back on holistic vistas, his fluid corporeality and agelessness bespeak a position of exceptionality analogous to that of twentieth- and twenty-first century superheroes. On the other hand, Whitman "sees health for himself in being one of the mass," a rank-and-file humanity with which he compacts a bond of reciprocal justice: "Whoever degrades another degrades me" (627, 680). Clark Kent-style, he passes for "one of the citizens," although, as he later concedes, "[n]o guard can shut me off, no law can prevent me" (690, 700). Above and under the law, Super Whitman rehearses the tug of war between vigilantism and democracy that came to typify superhero fiction. Ramzi Fawaz defines "superhero" as half public benefactor, half potential tyrant, "capable of refashioning the world in his image yet ethically committed to the well-being of a broader community" (6). Even when superheroes respect this commitment, their extralegal status sits uneasily in the juridical framework they protect. After all, no one voted them into office.

How, then, does Whitman's prophetic wink to self-proclaimed crusaders unsettle *Leaves of Grass*, the egalitarian song that—to quote George Kateb—

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Whitman belong to *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*.

anointed Whitman "the greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy" (19)? In what follows, I pursue this question as a gateway to more paramount ones: What happens to our idea of democracy once it is shown to depend on the extraordinary—not the common—individual? If democracy abides by its habitual paraphrase as "power to the people," what do we make of those "people" ceding a substantial chunk of this "power" to unelected demigods known to protect law and order in rather lawless, disordered ways? Does not the popularity of superheroes, as heralded by Super Whitman, nurture a depoliticized public sphere in which civic relations are replaced with mass-oriented spectacles of unipersonal prowess? "The pride of the United States," we read in Whitman's original preface, "leaves the wealth and finesse of the cities and all returns of commerce and agriculture and all the magnitude of geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy the breed of fullsized men or one fullsized man unconquerable and simple" (618). This "or" betrays Whitman's uncertainty: was the United States to thrive thanks to an accomplished population *or* to one superabled body?[2]

Although unaware of Whitman, scholars of superhero studies have grappled with these questions. Cultural historians, in particular, have agreed that superheroes' work has always been political, shaped by and shaping the status quo, from the genre's official inception in 1938 (Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1) to present-day revisions and relaunches across multiple media. Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2001) established the default organizing principle of these accounts, with each chapter unveiling a mutually constitutive relationship between specific milestones in US military-political history and the superhero(es) in vogue at that moment.[3] And so, Superman and Co. have been adamant New Dealers, Nazi-punchers, Cold-War enactors, and instigators as well as detractors of American exceptionalism writ large. They have operated alone and in groups, for and against the establishment (Fawaz 30-34). With allusions to the Revolutionary War, the fall of The Alamo, and the Goliad Massacre, Whitman makes clear from his book's first edition that Super Whitman does not exist in an ahistorical limbo either. The resultant imbrication of fact and fiction entwines, in turn, Super Whitman's self-making and US nation-making. For that reason, it is high time Whitman earns recognition in critical genealogies of the American superhero.

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[2] In his recently discovered *Manly Health and Training* (1858), Whitman titles one of his sections "Could There Be an Entire Nation of Vigorous and Beautiful Men?" (206). His answer combines healthy lifestyles with a eugenicist agenda. Such a violent gradation evinces the extremes Whitman endorses in his yearning for a fit population from which extraordinary individuals may still stand out.

[3] See DiPaolo; Lawrence and Jewett; Johnson; and Coogan (175-238).

Conversely, Whitman scholars bent on unraveling his political philosophy would benefit from a superhero studies angle.[4] By way of demonstrating this kind of analysis, I single out the following lines:

> The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
> The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
> (Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you,)
> The President holds a cabinet council, he is surrounded by the great secretaries. (673)

Read today, these lines conjure a prototypical superhero-narrative scenario: a damsel in distress, a sense of impending aggression, inefficient high officials removed several spheres from the populace, and an "I" witness inwardly burning with rage—the parenthetical aside suggests so. The missing ingredient is action: a release to the passage's built-up tension. Will "I" join the fray? Will the President look past his circle of secretaries toward the prostitute? Whereas the proximity of President and prostitute signals an egalitarian leveling, by placing them together on the page Whitman foregrounds their distance in real life. The poet mediates between them not by adopting a proactive intradiegetic role but by inserting them as equals in his non-hierarchical catalog. Mediation, in sum, entails a rethinking of the formal context in which the heroic deed announces itself but never materializes. Through a panoply of similar abortive missions and deferrals throughout *Leaves*, Whitman confronts us with our symbolic dependency on the "super" prefix, which he never uses but foreshadows as an indelible marker of US popular culture and political mythmaking. The speaker's inaction thus prefigures revisionary superhero stories such as Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight* (1986) and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *The*

[4] New Critics and the myth-symbol school buried Whitman's theorizations of democracy under an uncomplicated mysticism (Erkkila 8-9). Fascinatingly, the superhero theme surfaces in these accounts, even if these critics go nowhere near superhero comics. In 1939, Carl F. Strauch discerned five sections in "Song of Myself" with Whitman evolving to "Superman" (599). In 1959, Malcolm Cowley compared Whitman to those "Indian sages" emerging "from the state of samadhi or absorption" with "the feeling of being omnipotent" and "gifted with human superpowers" (xix). The Whitman-Superman connection faded as critics, following Betsy Erkkila, demonstrated continuities between Walter Whitman, Democratic-party hack in the 1840s, and Walt Whitman, bombastic bard of America and the modern self. Of special mention is *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* (2011), written by political theorists responding to Erkkila's rich contextualization and George Kateb's somewhat benign defense of Whitman's "democratic individuality" (19-20).

Watchmen (1986-87), which "not only question the heroes' motives, morals, and legal authority, they often ask whether the societies the heroes defend are worth preserving" (Singer 66). This is a productive deadlock; protracted action broaches social crises that punches alone will not solve.[5]

Not saving the day matters for democracy. Super Whitman's nonintervention raises prescient concerns about distributive justice and collective obligation. Political scientists have identified these concerns as pillars of a deliberative democracy, defined by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson as "a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future" (7). If successful, deliberation keeps going. Its endpoint is a sustained meta-democratic commentary, one worth exploring in our current moment. Over the last decade, experts in the United States and beyond have decried a rising populism, anti-intellectualism, and a troubling turn of the culture wars toward identitarian affiliation and violent exclusion. In their 2018 jeremiad *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt ascribe democracy's crisis not to procedural but cultural factors: "Democracies *do* have written rules (constitutions) and referees (the courts). But these work best, and survive longest, in countries where written constitutions are reinforced by their own unwritten rules of the game" (101). It behooves us, then, to cultivate these "unwritten rules" at the ground level of everyday encounters and interactions. The problem is that, if individuals in a democracy acquire rights only after being grafted onto a "we" totality traversed by institutional and legal arrangements, representations of this totality have often slowed democratic progress, as members of the *demos* uncritically accept formal and material strictures that valorize unity and vertically-imposed consent over horizontal dialogue and pluralistic difference (Castronovo and Nelson 8-9). And so, the disruptive cacophony of democracy is muffled by sanctioned rituals and forms of spectatorship (Greiman 19-20). Partisanship trumps participation.

Superhero narratives have been charged as one of these passivity-inducing spectacles (Dittmer, "Tyranny" 252-54; Ong 43). Henry Jenkins has lately observed an upsurge in progressive and reactionary appropriations of Superman, Batman,

[5] In a pioneering analysis, Umberto Eco brands Superman the "perfect example of a civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness" (22). A glance at the Man of Steel's incursions in comics and film confirms he is more interested in spur-of-the-moment heroics and philanthropy than in structural reform. When he defeats corrupt politicians, exposes scheming lobbyists, and personifies a New Deal ethos by building public-housing projects, he remains pure muscle. There is room neither for hesitation nor critique (Johnson 7-8).

Black Panther, and the Punisher among other superheroes whose ideological alignments, it seems, remain up for grabs (34-36). Might-makes-right solutions to complex problems and antagonisms cast a potent spell left and right of the political spectrum. In 2008, thousands of signers of a *Batman for President* initiative saw in Gotham's avenger the only hope against what they perceived as presidential candidate Barack Obama's soft-on-crime, socialist nanny state. Their slogan: "No welfare. No taxes. No mercy. Batman 2008" (qtd. in DiPaolo 15). Borrowing a template from this implausible, yet revelatory, electoral motto, my title "Super Whitman 1855" underscores the ease with which US society rewards larger-than-life characters with leadership positions, hoping they will spare citizens the (sometimes tedious and frustrating) work of democratic deliberation. A closer look at Whitman's early poems, however, finds the poet a possessor of superhero-like gifts who nonetheless refuses to let go of oppositionality as the fulcrum of the democratic process. *Batman for President* and other uncomplicated political fantasies increase the urgency to re-examine Whitman through the anachronistic lens of the superhero. As such, Whitman re-emerges formally and thematically as an unfinished superhero throwing into question our proclivity to entrust undemocratic figures with the task of preserving democracy.

Whether a democratic society has room in it for superpowered vigilantes constitutes a political problem whose complexity translates into strained protocols of representation and mediation. Whitman's formal and editorial innovations thus mirror his self-reflexive brand of mythmaking. My first section, which traces Super Whitman's gestation, sees Whitman mastering, from his vantage point as printer and journalist, new habits and technologies of cultural consumption that laid a foundation for the future mass appeal of superhero comics and films.[6] This insight clears the ground for my analysis of the inaugural *Leaves of Grass*. Here, I am aided by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of "flesh," an apt tool for grappling with how Super Whitman's all-encompassing, yet unfinished, text and anatomy arrange more deliberative political identifications than, say, *Batman for President*. In my final section, I analyze one of them: Robert Sikoryak's *Song of Myself!* (2013). In this comics remediation of Whitman's flagship poem, styled after Jack Kirby's comics for Marvel during the Silver Age (1956-1969), Sikoryak puts the Gray Bard's

[6] Whitman's poetics and politics endured several twists and turns prompted by Secession, the Civil War, and his failing health. I focus here on his early works aware that my choice sidelines *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman's most systematic account of democracy. Attentive to playful experimentation and its community-building potential, Whitman in the early 1850s was not yet fully compelled to define democracy in opposition to specific threats.

democratic lessons into practice, engaging in a dialogue that transcends historical backgrounds, media platforms, and highbrow/lowbrow cultural strata.

Super Whitman: An Origin Story

Page three of *Note Book Walt Whitman 82* registers an anomaly. It features, pasted, two newspaper clippings from the *New-York Daily Tribune* (March 5 and 12, 1852). Whitman was never much of a scrapbooker; print offers a rare sight in a notebook filled with his characteristic scribblings, strikethroughs, and blank-page intervals. The first news story concerns "a late fire in Cambridge, Mass." According to the report, the fire began in the low floors of a residential building and quickly threatened to engulf the entire structure. Then, one

> Mr. Thomas G. Fay, a merchant of Boston, and boarder at the Brattle House, observed in the upper story a female and several children. Without stopping for a moment to consider the dangers of an attempt to rescue them, he rushed through the wreathing smoke, and for a brief space the greatest anxiety prevailed in the crowd for his safety. In a moment more he emerged from the burning building, bearing the children in his arms, and followed by the mother. The entire upper part of the building was in a moment after enveloped in flames. Such an act of bravery, displayed in the preservation of human life, is worthy of more than a simple newspaper notice. (qtd. in Whitman "a schoolmaster")

We can only speculate why Whitman decided to preserve this item. That said, it is hard not to detect a correlation between its feel-good brand of everyman heroism and the intrinsic virtue Whitman ascribes to ordinary folk in *Leaves*—by 1852 already in the making. The call for an expressive vehicle more fitting than "a simple newspaper notice" strikes a Whitmanean chord, sending the poet confirmation that Americans' reservoir of heroism was to be unleashed only through unconventional literary forms and materials. Three years later Whitman self-published his self-designed, anonymous book of untitled blank-verse poems where "common people" are compared to "unrhymed poetry" (617).

In tone and subject matter, the second clipping could not be more antithetical to the first. It reproduces an extract from a North Carolina newspaper, *The Goldsboro Patriot*, describing how a free black man had been forced to sell his children back

into slavery in order to repay his debts. In an acerbic display of anti-Southern sentiment, the *Tribune* ties this incident to "the beauties of the 'Peculiar Institution,'" closing with a biting "This is a great country" (qtd. in Whitman, "a schoolmaster"). In pairing up these clippings, Whitman assays the stark juxtapositions that would pervade his poetic catalogs, as seen with the President and the prostitute or "the quadroon girl at the stand," a reminder of slavery's legal apparatus of violence and dispossession that ushers, in the next line, a more positive snippet of American pluck: "the machinist roll[ing] his sleeves" (671). Lacking further contextualization and unmentioned anywhere else in Whitman's archive, this notebook page paves the way to heroism's underpinnings in Whitman's oeuvre, specifically the split between heroes' "civic" and "political consciousness" (Eco 22). Fighting slavery was as noble a deed as rescuing women and children from fires, but, unlike the latter scenario, it required some concerted effort. *Leaves*'s chant of national and cosmic unity attempts to bridge this worrying gap between civic and political virtue. Undertaking such an ambitious task meant, for the poet, wondering whether "one fullsized man" could defeat slavery. If not, if what the United States needed was an army of "fullsized men," what would make a hero heroic? How would the individual—instrumental to Whitman's democratic vision—stand out as such? As I will explain later, encounters with slaves occasion Super Whitman's most thought-provoking impasses and deindividuation gestures. For the time being, these two clippings should be examined as contributing to Whitman's superhero ethos in embryo, as the Bard negotiated different models of heroism in and across an array of philosophical discourses, print artifacts, and grassroots engagements.

Heroism was a ubiquitous topic in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. An import from European Romanticism, its key trendsetter became Thomas Carlyle after the publication of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (1841). Carlyle's claim was straightforward: great individuals drive human history; either through their actions or example, they advance religion, politics, the arts, and every area of social life. Whitman was already tuned to Carlyle by way of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Transcendentalists. In 1842, while working full-time at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, he penned a brief, yet illuminating, review of *On Heroes*. If Whitman is sold on Carlyle's theory, he objects to the latter's style: "[w]e would have preferred to get the thoughts of this truly good thinker, in a plainer and more customary garb." Whitman cannot reconcile the affectation of Carlyle's prose with his conviction that Carlyle remained "a Democrat in that enlarged sense in which we would fain see more men Democrats . . . quick to champion the downtrodden, and earnest in his wrath at tyranny" (*Gathering* 291). The review features Whitman

grappling with what would become an obsession, namely, heroism being a matter of form as much as content. If a "simple newspaper notice" does not do justice to Mr. Fay's audacity, Carlyle's highfalutin diction proved too much. Whitman was not simply concerned about style: the need to couch meditations on heroism in accessible language discloses an imperative to make heroes themselves accessible to the populace. Whitman hoped to see more heroes, which was not likely to happen if discussions of heroism were relegated to philosophical salons, away from newspapers, taverns, and theaters. His early complaint here dovetails a political rift between individual and mass with an aesthetic one between high and popular culture.

The covert legacy of this conflation in superhero culture has yet to be studied. Even though one shudders to put the literati Carlyle in conversation with pulp superhero comics, *On Heroes* congregates deities (Odin) and historical figures (Luther, Shakespeare, Napoleon). Whitman added common people to the mix, setting a precedent for everymen-turned-vigilantes Peter Parker/Spiderman and Steve Rogers/Captain America. In doing so, the poet was responding to less elevated influences than Carlyle's. As a journalist dabbling in talk-of-the-town stories and an antebellum urbanite splitting his time between Brooklyn and Manhattan, Whitman attended plays such as *Beulah Spa; or Two of the B'hoys* (1834) and *Mose in a Muss* (1849), in which proud working-class "roughs" (a.k.a "b'hoys") exhibited "superhuman powers," using "lampposts as clubs" and swimming "across the Hudson with two strokes" (Reynolds 104). When, in *Leaves*, he introduces himself as "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," the poet affiliates with this collective in the same breath in which he asserts his nationality and supranational transcendence (680). Strategically placed not at the outset but in the body of the text, this line actualized Whitman's merging of ordinary aesthetics and godly (super)heroism, abiding by his critique of Carlyle as well as his exposure to supermen in plain clothes.

As an engaged observer of urban and national life, Whitman also frequented artistic circles where he discussed the attributes of heroes with fellow creators, patrons, and audiences. On March 31, 1851, he lectured at the Brooklyn Art Union, making an impassioned case for what he called "heroic beauty": an ideal that matches action and composure. Like Super Whitman, most of his examples—"Washington in some great crisis, Lawrence in the bloody deck of the *Chesapeake*, Mary Stewart at the block, Kossuth in captivity and Mazzini in exile"—err on thinking rather than acting. The stasis brought by doubt, exile, and captivity try true heroes' souls, awakening in them an "intellectual majesty [that] bears itself out with calmness amid popular odium or circumstances of cruelty." Far from a sign of defeat, these moments

of inaction yield a "sublime moral beauty" which corresponds with the "highest phases of the artistic spirit" (*Uncollected* 246). Whitman, then, calls upon artists to spread awareness of a "heroic beauty" that too easily goes unnoticed: "he does a good work who, pausing in the way, calls to the feverish crowd that in the life we live upon this beautiful earth, there may, after all, be something vaster and better than dress and the table, and business and politics" (*Uncollected* 241). This is not a refusal of politics as much as a substitution of its stagnant institutions and rituals with spontaneous horizontal exchanges—deliberative democracy, in sum. Practicing what he preaches, Whitman quotes lecturers addressing similar topics in the American Artists' Association, the Academy of Design, and other cooperatives (*Uncollected* 244). What transpires here is a fertile circuit of cultural producers who reject heroism as a top-down imposition from religious, educational, and political authorities, concocting instead paradigms of heroism aligned with a working-class ideology and aesthetic.

Additional evidence insinuates that today Whitman would loiter in hipster coffee shops as assiduously as comic book stores. Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley's co-edited *Whitman among the Bohemians* (2014) tracks down Whitman's involvement with the Bohemian, anti-bourgeois crowd that gathered at Manhattan's Pfaff's beer cellar in the late 1850s (xii). There, Whitman befriended cartoonists and graphic artists; some like Thomas Nast would go on to gain national fame and consolidate the syndicated cartoon tradition, which today we think of as the prehistory of comics. As Ruth L. Bohan reminds us, the young poet took an interest in the work of magazine illustrators and cartoonists, often inviting them to sketch caricatures and other drawings in his notebooks ("Whitman" 132-52). Decades later, in a retrospective essay titled "How *Leaves of Grass* Was Made" (1892), Whitman summed up his career goal as "to furnish or suggest, by free cartoon outlinings, a special portraiture, the Western man's and woman's" ("How" 732). His use of "cartoon" here should not be taken to imply Whitman was creating comics *avant la lettre*.[7] However, this characterization of his lifetime work as a series of cartoons owes something to the impromptu, unpretentious artistic praxis he witnessed at Pfaff's and which, fittingly enough, matched his evolving theory of heroism, distilled in equal doses from Carlyle's "Great Man" history, rowdy theaters, and Bohemian hangouts.

Even though Whitman was no visual artist, these influences converge in the frontispiece of his *Leaves* debut and in the poems that followed. They also reappear

[7] Whitman died in 1892. Most accounts date the official birth of the comic strip to 1894, when Richard Outcalt's "Yellow Kid" series appeared in several New York weeklies.

in Sikoryak's *Song of Myself!* Before examining Sikoryak's remediation in full detail, though, we need to put Whitman's renowned daguerreotype and poetic experiments in further conversation with one another and with Whitman's overall presentation of his "Super" self.

Leaves of Grass #1

In 1842, Whitman asked Carlyle to dress his words in a "customary garb"; in 1855, the poet followed suit by placing his own portrait in workingman's clothes at the beginning of *Leaves* (see fig. 1). An engraving from a daguerreotype, the image evinced the poet's access to new visual and print technologies. Its statement of intent reverberated on several fronts, most notably distancing the up-and-coming poet from the respectable men of letters of his time. Whitman appears erect, staring at us, his arms akimbo and his left hand in his pocket. The jaunty hat, relaxed posture, and worn-out attire manifest a breach of etiquette that Whitman deemed a precondition of his political and aesthetic call. His loafer pose has focalized much scholarly commentary on this iconic image (Bohan, *Looking* 31-34). I continue this thread by seeing in the portrait Super Whitman's presentation card. Ted Genoways has noticed important similarities between it and popular representations of "b'hoys" (88-91). If "b'hoys" appeared onstage and in print as repositories of superhuman strength and agility, Whitman's self-fashioning after them fulfilled a double purpose: it established his working-class credentials ("one of the mass") and announced his superhuman body ("I rise extatic through all"). In this anonymous image, Whitman brings the dialectic clash between "fullsized man" and "fullsized men" to a synthesis: Super Whitman.

But this convergence does not come across explicitly. On the contrary, as Ed Folsom has ventured, the scandalous frontispiece dared readers "to be active, not passive; to enter into the creative act; to bring the poem to life; not to sit back and wait for the authority to pour meaning into the vessel-reader" (138). Readers had to determine whether the insouciant rough staring at them was friend or foe, whether his partially unbuttoned shirt hid a secret, non-normative identity.[8] The rest of the volume did not make things easier. Whitman's unorthodox portrait is one among many breakthroughs: neither the preface nor the twelve poems have titles; punctuation is loose or non-existent (with a fondness for ellipses over periods); blank-verse lines run all the way to the end of the page; the size is unusually large

[8] Folsom has documented the extent to which Whitman's friends worried about the impact the portrait would have on the public (135-36).

for a book of poetry; and the title letters in the jacket appear as blooming vines and sprouts—a hint that the poems inside would outgrow the book's material confines. Auguring the secret-identity theme of countless superhero franchises, the author's name turns up on (rather inconspicuous) page 29. For the most part these were Whitman's deliberate choices. If Super Whitman was to disrupt normative conceptions of personhood and politics, he necessitated an innovative platform.

In an uncanny parallel, superhero narratives proliferated first in the "hybrid word-and-image form" of comics and then in film, television, and videogames, which offer spectators different degrees of immersion and participation (Chute, "Comics" 452). Superheroes depend on "transmedia strategies"—the phrase is Liam Burke's—to reach wide audiences and substantiate their anti-elitism. With Whitman as an unacknowledged precursor, these boundary crossings opened up spaces for deliberation.[9] In the 1950s and 1960s, Marvel and DC Comics issues started to append and even reward letters where shrewd readers pinpointed continuity flaws and other narrative glitches (let us entertain for a moment the thought of a government publishing and giving prizes to its most hypercritical citizens). The evolution and significance of these fora have been discussed (Fawaz 95-98; Dittmer, "Tyranny" 252); their roots in pre-comics literature have not. In calling Whitman a precursor of these community-building practices, I am not saying that Marvel and DC Comics CEOs kept a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in their nightstands. My point is that Whitman strived to foster a participative readership in ways that resonate with superheroes' serviceability as discussion starters (not just unilateral vigilantes), a serviceability contingent on publishers facilitating material and symbolic venues for reflection and debate. Back in 1855, while the frontispiece sent readers into deliberative motion, interpellations such as the following confirm that the Bard designed *Leaves* to reach its climax outside itself, in readers taking ownership of the poem:

> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in books,
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
> You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (663, ellipses in original)

[9] Bohan borrows W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of the "imagetext" to argue that, unlike most authorial portraits in books, Whitman's does not stand apart from the volume. Instead, "[t]he structural and thematic unorthodoxies of the verse are recast in the concentrated forms of this ideologically resonant engraving" (*Looking* 33).

Whereas Whitman turns books into carcasses for readers to dispense with, the fact that this injunction reaches us from a printed book reveals the medium's crucial role in igniting public discussion, even at the expense of its assumed cultural authority. Comics producers welcoming readers' feedback and incorporating their voices issue after issue prompted the same deliberative cycle.

Democracy à la Whitman prioritizes deliberation over representation. The stalemate we reach attempting to represent democracy through language or images (or both) may be overcome by discussing our attempts with others ("listen[ing] to all sides"). Chantal Mouffe has warned us about "a transparent society, reconciled with itself, for that kind of fantasy leads to totalitarianism. A project of radical and plural democracy, on the contrary, requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality and of conflict" (18). Such a pugnacious turn brings discussants to the slippery notion of sovereignty in relation to embodied subjectivity—perhaps the main node bringing Super Whitman and superheroes together.

Sovereignty's exact location has proven a moot point in efforts to reify democracy. In the United States, the assumption has been that sovereignty resides in "the People" but, as historians of Constitutional Law would quickly argue, the phrase conceals as much as it reveals (Smith 119). Given this complication, US citizens have historically enabled certain individuals, usually the President, to reabsorb popular sovereignty. Dana D. Nelson lucidly tracks down a "president-as-superhero myth" that "promises all the democracy with none of the work," a myth based on mass-marketed depictions of US Presidents—from George Washington to George W. Bush—as spandex-wearing action figures (67). Such a trend should not surprise us (but by all means should concern us, in light of *Batman for President*) in a society at a loss to concretize alternatives to unipersonal sovereignty. In a dazzling premonition of Nelson's critique, Whitman reviles the presidency: "Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man" (619-20). Once again, the alternation of singular and plural nouns, the almost inadvertent movement from "poets" to "poet," sends us back to square one: "fullsized man" or "men"? Mr. Fay or an army of Fays? Poets or poet?

This dilemma hides a problem of embodiment endemic to political symbology. In *Democracy and Political Theory* (1988), Claude Lefort explains the disembodiment of the *demos* that subtends the transition from monarchical to democratic governments, "when the body of the king was destroyed, when the body

politic was decapitated and when, at the same time, the corporeality of the social was dissolved. There then occurred what I would call a 'disincorporation' of individuals" (303). Lefort riffs on Ernst Kantorowicz's theory of the king's two bodies, according to which the sustained fiction of the King's second body or "Body politic" unites the kingdom around "a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government." This disembodied locus of power guarantees the continuity of the monarchy regardless of the inevitable demise of the King's first or "natural Body" (Edmund Plowden, qtd. in Kantorowicz 7). Paul Downes has resituated Kantorowicz's concept in the context of the American Revolution and the emergence of the United States as a constitutional democracy. Downes centers on how Thomas Jefferson's ambiguous grammar in the "Declaration of Independence" transferred sovereignty from King George III to US national subjects while subtly perpetuating the obscure sources of its legitimacy (6-7). The theological-mystical construct of the King's "Body politic"—a transcription of Christ's sacred body—was invested in the citizenry without losing an iota of its intangible magic.

Whitman was fascinated and troubled by sovereign power's constitutive magic, at times exulting in Super Whitman's king-like exceptionality, other times being "no stander above men and women," at all times inspired by Carlyle's galleries of Great Men yet also wanting to acknowledge the anonymous b'hoys and Mr. Fays he bumped into every day (680). Unsurprisingly, Whitman oscillates between both ends of the scale. He dictates that "a bard is to be commensurate with a people" (618). Yet, in one of "Song of Myself"'s most quoted lines, he does not equalize as much as encircle others: "I am large, I contain multitudes" (709). A new question arises—and Sikoryak will answer it provocatively—about whether we should visualize Whitman as gigantic vessel or mathematical mean value—in his own words, "the equalizer of his age and land" (620). The resultant dilemma between a Hobbesian body politic and a standardized Vitruvian Man arises in full force in one of his notebooks: "I feel cramped here in these coarse walls of flesh" ("Autobiographical"). Aiming for an organic whole that would respect individual counter-discourses, he dabbles in egalitarian scenes, such as the "President's taking off his hat to them [common people] not they to him" (617). But abridging the gap between elected representatives and the represented proves easier than capturing the represented in their irreducible heterogeneity. Whitman closes the preface with the dictum that "[t]he proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (636). What kind of body results from that? Whereas absorption designates a reciprocal merging, like the atoms poet and reader exchange in the poem's beginning, the reality was one of representation, which entails a funneling of the general will through elected

officials. The choice remained one between enforced sameness ("fullsized men") or one-man's authority ("fullsized man"). This sempiternal dilemma places Whitman again in the company of superheroes.

Like superheroes, Whitman performs an excess of identity, a theatrics of the self that lends itself to others' appropriations and reclamations. Framed as such, Whitman's absorptive democracy occurs also as fracture. That is, what if his goal were not to clinch an entente between the one and the many but to show the misguidedness of such a balancing act? Demystifying popular sovereignty as something that resists master tropes raises awareness (and, hopefully, conversations) about the limits of collective representation and individual agency. Spectacularly amusing as they are, Super Whitman's and other superheroes' unpredictable anatomies also fuel a desire for a *polis* visualized in ways other than through corporate metaphors and the fixed identities they solidify (e.g., the king's "Body Politic"). Russ Castronovo has signaled the democratic payoff of undoing this logic, since "oppositional activity loses a good deal of its incalculable ferment when it is keyed to a recognizable subject" (30). In this regard, superhero fiction brims with provocative unsettlements of identity: the unstable flesh of Hulk, Mystique, and the Human Torch; the duplicitous existence of Clark Kent/Superman and Bruce Wayne/Batman; and, most notably, insurrectionary crowds sporting the (anti)hero's mask in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) and Todd Phillips's film *Joker* (2019).

When fed-up citizens in totalitarian London and corrupted Gotham revolt behind a Guy Fawkes or a Joker mask, they do not transition into a new identity as much as assert identity's de facto incompleteness. Like Whitman's nameless frontispiece, who could be someone or anyone, the mask here indexes a subject whose cracks are exposed rather than sealed once citizens embrace it, a symbol that allows unity without letting go of individuals' capacity for civic collaboration and opposition to the political mainstream. In recent years the Guy Fawkes mask has provided a logo to leaderless anti-establishment movements from Anonymous to Antifa. As for Joker, after the FBI warned of mass-shooting threats from so-called "Clowncels," some theaters in the United States banned makeup and costumes during the screening of Phillips's movie (Margolin and Katersky). For sure, zesty theatrics of the self can entice viewers into fascistic adoration-emulation dynamics; nonetheless, whoever yearned to emulate Joker bypassed the text in which he appeared. Slavoj Žižek sets the record straight when he recalls that "Arthur-Joker is not presented as a figure of identification" (n. pag.). Although Joker magnetizes the victims of chronic inequality and a dismantled welfare state, what Phillips arranges

is a simulacrum of political identification, a chance for audiences to gauge the validity of rallying behind Joker.

In this process, Joker and Guy Fawkes morph into a mask and a crowd, less than a body and more than a body. The same could be said of Whitman's scattered, unruly anatomy:

> What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?
> All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own,
> . . . . . .
> And I know I am solid and sound,
> To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
> All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means. (676-77)

This and related passages scatter and regroup the fragments of Whitman's and others' identities in an entropic movement the poet elsewhere names "influx and efflux," first conceived as a trade of free-flowing atoms, unfolding here by means of reading, writing, and re-reading, which brings to mind the Bard's occasional scrapbooking and quotation-heavy lectures (679). Being "solid" is not at odds with questioning the self's boundaries. These porous borders welcome external input and return the subject to the question "What is a man anyhow?" The answer is: far from a coherent subject. And so, Whitman grows into an affective hub that can be traced in a superhero culture punctuated by lively comic cons, cosplay events, and online chat rooms. Practitioners of this culture do not stay home. They do not even stay in themselves.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri label the result of this simultaneous embodiment and deindividuation "flesh." Flesh enables them to theorize rhizomatic multitudes' struggling for democracy in the twenty-first century. Shunting trite body metaphors to the sidelines, flesh evolves into a latent force: "maddeningly elusive, . . . it cannot be entirely corralled into the hierarchical organs of a political body" (192). Consequently, flesh teases out the paradox of popular sovereignty: not a bounded, static terrain as much as an amalgam of identifications and disavowals. Whitman and Sikoryak thus activate a representational mode that unites and fragments the people's flesh at once (Whitman rallies the forces of democracy behind his b'hoy guise; Sikoryak depicts a Godzilla-esque Whitman terrifying crowds in his attempts to contain them). In order to capture this double bind, Hardt and Negri borrow the term "disjunctive synthesis" from another renowned duo, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "Representation . . . links the multitude to government and at the same time

separates it. Representation is a *disjunctive synthesis* in that it simultaneously connects and cuts" (Hardt and Negri 241). Whereas undiscerning superhero appropriations of the *Batman for President* kind hurriedly and conveniently connect the loose strands of a given ideological position, the reflexive turn that undergirds more layered superhero narratives as well as *Leaves* produces flesh, understood as the raw material of a society whose members are neither seamlessly united nor completely isolated from each other.

Slavery more than any other political crisis during Whitman's era activates this push-and-pull mechanism and, as a result, defuses Super Whitman's powers. In one of *Leaves*'s most controversial passages, from the poem later known as "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman arrives at a slave auction and assumes the auctioneer's role:

> Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning in tendon and nerve;
> They shall be stript that you may see them.
>
> Exquisite senses, lifelit eyes, pluck, volition,
> Flakes of breastmuscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby, goodsized arms and legs,
> And wonders within there yet.
>
> Within there runs his blood . . . the same old blood . . . the same red running blood;
> There swells and jets his heart . . . There all passions and desires . . . all reachings and aspirations. (735, ellipses in original)

Supersight renders the slave's muscular body transparent and accessible, in what may be construed as a fantasy of (visual) ownership. The repetition of "blood" suggests otherwise. It rings with the trepidation of not being able to pinpoint exactly what makes the slave a slave (if he and the speaker share the same blood). Some scholars have taken issue with how, for Whitman to unveil our shared humanity, he has to occupy the position of the slave auctioneer, which makes it unclear whether he is legitimating or undermining slavery (Sánchez-Eppler 50-57). In contrast with the paratactic flow of other catalogs, Whitman's syntax in these lines emphasizes fragmentation: a formal resistance to the content's movement toward unity. The resultant dialogic tension eschews any polarized interpretation of the sequence as being pro- or anti-slavery. Instead, Whitman's disjunctive synthesis highlights the

artificiality of the slave's construction as a non-normative subject. We learn that his blood is our blood, but Whitman leaves the exact anatomical coordinates in which the slave becomes a racialized Other in a zone of uncertainty. A creator of flesh, Whitman assembles bodies (the President, the prostitute, the slave) while calling into question the very linkages he orchestrates: if the slave and speaker share the same blood, what prevents their mutual identification? Blood remains, in the end, "his blood"; it lies "there," not here.

Incomplete identities apt democratic subjects make. Super Whitman's extraordinary gifts sustain him as a larger-than-life protector of the realm, but they do not grant social cohesion. The poet conveys this failure in a generative, neither plaintive nor self-centered, fashion. In these impasses, Super Whitman discloses his status as an unfinished superhero, familiarizing us with the instability of this construct while confronting us with the question of why democratic subjects would fantasize about lone vigilantes and other remedial figures of singlehanded sovereignty. This is best seen when the speaker shelters a runaway slave:

> The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,
> I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
> Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey and weak,
> And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,
> And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,
> And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes,
> And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
> And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
> He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north,
> I had him sit next me at table . . . my firelock leaned in the corner. (669, ellipsis in original)

An enigmatic fracture closes one of Whitman's most straightforwardly narrative sequences. How far is the speaker from his weapon? Is the "firelock" there to defend him and the slave, or him *from* the slave? What do we make of the troubling statement "I had him" when referencing a slave on the run? To complicate things further, Whitman removes a preposition from the line's first half ("next *to* me") and an indefinite article ("*the* table"). This was no typo, for the line remains intact in later

editions. What kind of unity is this in which the cogs that unite (prepositions, articles) vanish? "People are ungrammatical"—Whitman wrote years later (*Poetry* 944). Through its truncated grammar, the "firelock" line shuns a complacent vision of "the People" as a whole. Whitman and slave become flesh not through what they have in common but through what they do not know about each other yet. Far from signaling defeat, the line unveils the speaker's internal debate. By the time he utters it the slave has already "passed north," while the speaker remains haunted by his inability to comprehend his former guest. Awareness that not even the mightiest endowments grant access to others' subjectivity forestalls union and engenders deliberation—in places where most audiences expect action.

Whitman famously closes the first version of "Song of Myself" by asking readers to tag along: "Failing to fetch me me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop some where waiting for you" (710). In its refusal to end, this ending encapsulates the poem's unremitting tension between unequivocal political subjects and disorganized flesh. "Missing me one place search another" rings like a superhero's catchphrase, a technique that signals the conclusion of an adventure while reassuring readers new ones will follow (i.e., the hero returns because he or she has a phrase to say). However, as in the section of the runaway slave, the oddities of form disjoint seemingly predictable subject positions. The anxious typo that doubles "me" echoes the "blood" in the slave auction sequence, threading another chain of signifiers covering up, in their redundancy, an absent signified. And speaking of absences, the missing period after "you" suggests that the merging between the "I" that opens the poem and this final "you" is still ongoing. Poet and reader become mired in a metaphorical hide-and-seek game that stands for deliberation itself. Indeed, what better way to describe the oppositional, agonistic, and yet generative role of deliberation than two subjects seeking each other out and, in doing so, changing who they are without fully becoming each other? Whitman ends not with unity but with an invitation to keep trying. A century and a half later, Sikoryak responded from the superhero's ancestral home—the comic book.

Whitman-Kirby-Sikoryak

Acclaimed comics artist Robert Sikoryak drew *Song of Myself!* in response to the 24-hour Comic Dare. Posed by illustrator and comics scholar Scott McCloud, the challenge consisted in completing 24 pages of a comic in 24 hours. Counting "16 pages in 25 consecutive hours," Sikoryak fell short of success, although his failure does not impede *Song* from lending a relevant commentary on the openness and

incompletion integral to Whitman's take on heroism and democratic art (Sikoryak, inner jacket). In fact, there is something eminently Whitmanian in Sikoryak's modus operandi. He read "Song of Myself" the night before the challenge and jotted right away the main ideas for the plot and visuals. It is fair to assume that such an instinctual approach would have pleased Whitman himself, who always favored the sparks of inspiration over scholarly exegesis. Far from silencing his defeat, Sikoryak includes the layout of eight incomplete pages, blank panels with their respective Whitman quotes. Readers are invited to visualize—even draw!—Whitmanian invocations such as "I give the sign of democracy" (17). Therefore, *Song* becomes an unfinished superhero comic about an unfinished superhero. Other examples of disjunctive synthesis unfold via abrupt narrative jumps, verbal-visual frictions, and a hodge-podge of genres and allusions, epitomized in the comic's self-presentation as a "graphic poem" (1).

Sikoryak revamps Whitman by mimicking the aesthetics of Marvel Comics during the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Jack Kirby's "The Thing." Like Whitman, Kirby firmly believed in the common man: "I thought comics were a common form of art and strictly American . . . America was the home of the common man, and show me the common man that can't do a comic" (qtd. in Dittmer, *Captain* 10). Also like Whitman, Kirby delineated this commonality by frequenting its outermost deviations. In Whitman these included prostitutes and slaves, among other social outcasts. For Kirby these meant monsters and mutants. A member of the Fantastic Four, The Thing (a.k.a Ben Grimm) made comics history by overlapping the until-then antagonistic archetypes of the grotesque monster and the pristine superhero. Like the other Fantastic Four, Grimm is exposed to cosmic rays during a mission in outer space and develops a superpower as a result—in his case, superhuman strength. Unlike them, though, he is left utterly disfigured and incapable of passing as normal, much less navigating the city without smashing door frames and sidewalks (Alaniz 89-92). If Superman and his ilk elicit identification, the Thing resents the abjection he awakens in others. Sikoryak's provocation, then, is to recast Whitman as devoted server of a community that does not love him back.

The vintage, yellow cover of *Song!* (see fig. 2) hints back at the 1855 frontispiece in its depiction of a full-bodied Whitman, here with the poet's bearded face atop the Thing's brick-ish, gargantuan body. Here Whitman defies readers more openly, staring at them and spreading his arms, turning the original's air of indolence into a literal monstrosity on the page. A stamp in the upper right corner reads "Approved by the Poetry Code Authority"—a mocking reference to the infamous Comics Code Authority, in charge of regulating comics' content on behalf of the US

government from 1954 until 2001 (Wright 172-79). The state's intervention allegedly sanitizes the comics' content, but it also calls attention to the medium itself as an expressive channel rife with subversive potential and thereby needing state supervision. More emphatically than the blank background of Whitman's 1855 portrait, this institutional inscription brands Whitman's poetry and the superhero genre efficient dissent tools.

Song's skeletal plot follows Whitman's metamorphosis into a Thing-like mutant and his negotiation of such a stigmatized identity. The story opens on a Faustian note, with a mad-scientist Whitman mixing decanters in his lab and glancing at their content while discovering that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1). Whitman then drinks one of his concoctions and starts convulsing. Sikoryak portrays his mutation by grafting ecstatic lines from "Song of Myself" onto fast, saccade-like panels alternating between the poet's grotesque body and pedestrians' horrified reactions after encountering it. The interchangeable atoms that enabled a mystical symbiosis in the poem produce here a Godzilla-esque, antediluvian monster of the kind that haunted the post-atomic imagination during the Cold War. Reimagined as unruly particles with a will of their own, the "atoms" mentioned by the protagonist fragment rather than unite. Such fragmentation unfolds at several levels. Unity through division appears, for example, in panels where Sikoryak's illustrations and Whitman's words cancel each other out. The line "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am, stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary" acquires an ironical overtone on a fragmented page filled with close-ups of Whitman's seizure and panic scenes of faces and bodies on the run (4).

Sikoryak here not only gestures to Whitman and Kirby but to the very genesis of the modern superhero, making a case for Whitman's understudied contribution to its popularity. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's inaugural *Action Comics* #1 issue, the one featuring Superman, stirred a moral panic on and outside the page. Even seen today, its cover raises a few eyebrows about the legitimacy of the protagonist in a democratic society (see fig. 3). It showcases Superman smashing a car against a rock while frightened bystanders flee the scene. "If first impressions matter," opines Jeffrey K. Johnson, "then Superman seemed to be projecting himself as a violent strongman unworried about law and order" (13). Many of Sikoryak's panels pay tribute to Siegel and Shuster's foundational cover, narrating how the Thing-Whitman mutates into a behemoth from which terrorized pedestrians recoil. In a rectangular panel stretching over the bottom of page 5, we see a gigantic Thing-Whitman heading toward the crowd while shouting: "I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and

wait." The image reveals a rather impatient Whitman whose tempestuous advances contradict his plea for calm deliberation (see fig. 4).

Even though one may be tempted to interpret *Song* in terms of Sikoryak's postmodern statement on the superhero tradition, the truth is that the first Superman issue also lacks a discernible narrative progression and seems put together in a rush, through what Johnson describes as a "cut and paste" method (13). Sheldon Mayer, a pioneer comics editor during the 1930s, once referred to the customary process of producing a comic book as "a schlock operation . . . we bought the [comics] material for practically nothing and slapped it together" (qtd. in Wright 4). Sikoryak in *Song* is no avant-gardist, rather a careful reenactor of the superhero comics industry's inauspicious beginnings. The fact that these beginnings yielded chaotic enmeshments and remediations of printed material already in circulation returns us to Whitman's ephemeral scrapbooking and the wildly assorted catalogs of *Leaves*. With this historical and aesthetic development in our rearview mirror, we may be less dumbfounded by Sikoryak's decision to number *Song*'s sections randomly and to deliver in each one a haphazard selection of quotes and images. Ultimately, *Song*'s formal intricacies and dense intertextual web (it takes a comics connoisseur to navigate it) preempt rushed co-optations of a vigilante/superhero protagonist. This is not just because Whitman appears in the unsavory guises of the Thing and Godzilla; the potential for *Song* to catalyze a rethinking of perfunctory community-making and political-identification patterns rests primarily on a twofold movement of connection through separation.

Disjunctive synthesis surfaces every time Thing-Whitman tries to marshal a crowd to no avail. His failures send him back to isolated locales—a cemetery, a forest, the cosmos—where he recites "Song of Myself," declaring his love of humanity while inexorably placed further away from it. The story's sloppy structure mimics Superman's comics debut and *Leaves*'s anarchic outline and mocks, also in line with the poems themselves, the linearity and *telos* of epic poetry—an injunction that gains crucial force against reductive vigilante fantasies, for these tend to embrace, more often than not, superheroes as an endpoint of human and social development (for instance, the paramilitary undertones of the Batman 2008 campaign presuppose that, with the dark knight in the Oval Office, presidential elections would become obsolete). The tandem Sikoryak-Whitman offers an alternative by scattering subject positions that the conservative superhero tends to homogenize. *Song* thus dramatizes the conflict between corporeal metaphors of collectivity and flesh.

During the intonation of section 16 of "Song of Myself," Thing-Whitman disappears (9-11). In his stead, Sikoryak showcases a parade of Sendak-esque

monsters, including dragons, werewolves, and horned demons (see fig. 5). Each panel is presided by a quote from this section, in which Whitman morphs into Americans of all ages, regions, and occupations: "Southerner," "Yankee," "Kentuckian," "boatman," "planter"—no mention of slaves, however. The original text carries out Whitman's aspiration to "equalize" America and Americans—with the poet harmonizing opposites such as "old and young," "foolish" and "wise," "southerner" and "northerner," etc. (674). In Sikoryak's visualization, this reconciliation translates into a monstrous parade lead—not contained—by Whitman (10). Individual monsters amiably stare at us and waive their hands from vertical, individual panels in what seems a reminder that Americans best exist as hubs of potentialities rather than concrete actualizations of well-bounded selves and bodies. In their attack against a stultified democracy, Hardt and Negri describe the "living social flesh" of the democratic multitude *precisely* as an entity that "can easily appear monstrous" (192). The monstrosity of this unformed flesh does not reside in its grotesque aspect as much as its capacity to embrace "new, alternative networks of affection and social organization" (193). As imagined by Sikoryak, the alternative community-building mechanism that arises from Whitman's verse transcends both containment and averaging, respecting individuals' potentiality and ultimate unknowability.

Whitman's monstrous flesh in *Song* appears, by virtue of comics technique, simultaneously fragmented, united, and multiplied (12). This visualization of Whitman's "influx and efflux" culminates in a gestalt image in which a multitude of Whitmans characterized as the Thing and yet retaining a modicum of individuality (attired as farmers, mechanics, artists) occupy the entire page while also compartmentalized by conventional panel divisions (see fig. 6). This two-fold image accompanies these original lines, with Whitman again aiming toward a rapprochement between individual and mass:

> A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker,
> A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest.
>
> I resist anything better than my own diversity,
> And breathe the air and leave plenty after me,
> And am not stuck up, and am in my place. (674)

Following the trajectories of Joker and Guy Fawkes, Sikoryak's Whitman here becomes a mask. For every point of connection bringing these entities together

(merged torsos, gestalt effect), Sikoryak deploys the interstitial space between panels, known in comics parlance as the "gutter," to fracture this fusion's intended whole. The line "I resist anything better than my own diversity" reproduces, in its blurring of the self's boundaries, the page's visual disjunctive-synthesis effect. Hillary Chute has affirmed that "comics calls attention to its own additive nature . . . and also to what it subtracts, or refuses to measure and materialize, in the spaces between" (36). In his deft assimilation of this maxim, Sikoryak infuses new energy into Whitman's verse. The metamorphic, additive bravado of the first two lines is soon challenged by the formal divisions on the page as well as by analogous negative spaces mentioned by Whitman: the "anything" that is not me, the "air" left unbreathed, the places where I am not and which are not mine to claim.

Conclusion: Unfinished Superheroes

In his daring, yet historically informed, convergence of Whitman's poetry and superhero comics, Sikoryak advances a meditation on the nature and limits of representative democracy, in particular the chasm between individual and popular sovereignty. Scripted as a superhero's power in opposition to the power of the people he stands for, this clash leads Whitman and his comics-art respondent to repeatedly unbound and fuse the extraordinary one and the ordinary many. Such a gesture, I have argued, can help us recalibrate the current crisis of deliberative democracy. Decades ago, John Dewey wrote that "democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion," a life that "had its seer in Walt Whitman." Dewey subordinated this "communion," with Whitman as its apostle, to "[t]he highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication [that] must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it" (141). In his simultaneous invocation of media, class, and aesthetics, Dewey laid out the sustaining conditions for deliberators to deliberate. My provocation—a Whitmanian one, for sure—charts these conditions in the unceremonial loci of free-verse poetry and superhero texts, sites where the actors of democracy are deindividualized into flesh. Notwithstanding the lack of solutions to the problems they lay out (inequality, violence, conformity), Whitman and Sikoryak ask us, through their qualms about totalizing democratic symbols, to cling to deliberation instead.

Such is the unfinished job of the unfinished superhero. In *Leaves of Grass* as well as in *Song of Myself!*, Whitman wonders and wanders, oscillating between crowded scenes and solitary reflection. The democratic culture that emanates from

this perennial motion eschews easy entrenchments in pre-arranged ideological positions. We may chase this agonistic public sphere by rereading Whitman via superhero culture, an approach itself inseparable from an embrace of superhero studies via Whitman. To study Whitman through the optics of superhero narratives and vice versa does not aim to cultivate a geeky subculture nor to indulge in anachronism. Examining Whitman's super-self and its afterlives in superhero narratives helps us shake up a *demos* too comfortable waiting for—rather than questioning—Superman.

Figures

Fig. 1. Walt Whitman by Samuel Hollyer, engraving of a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison (original lost), 1854.

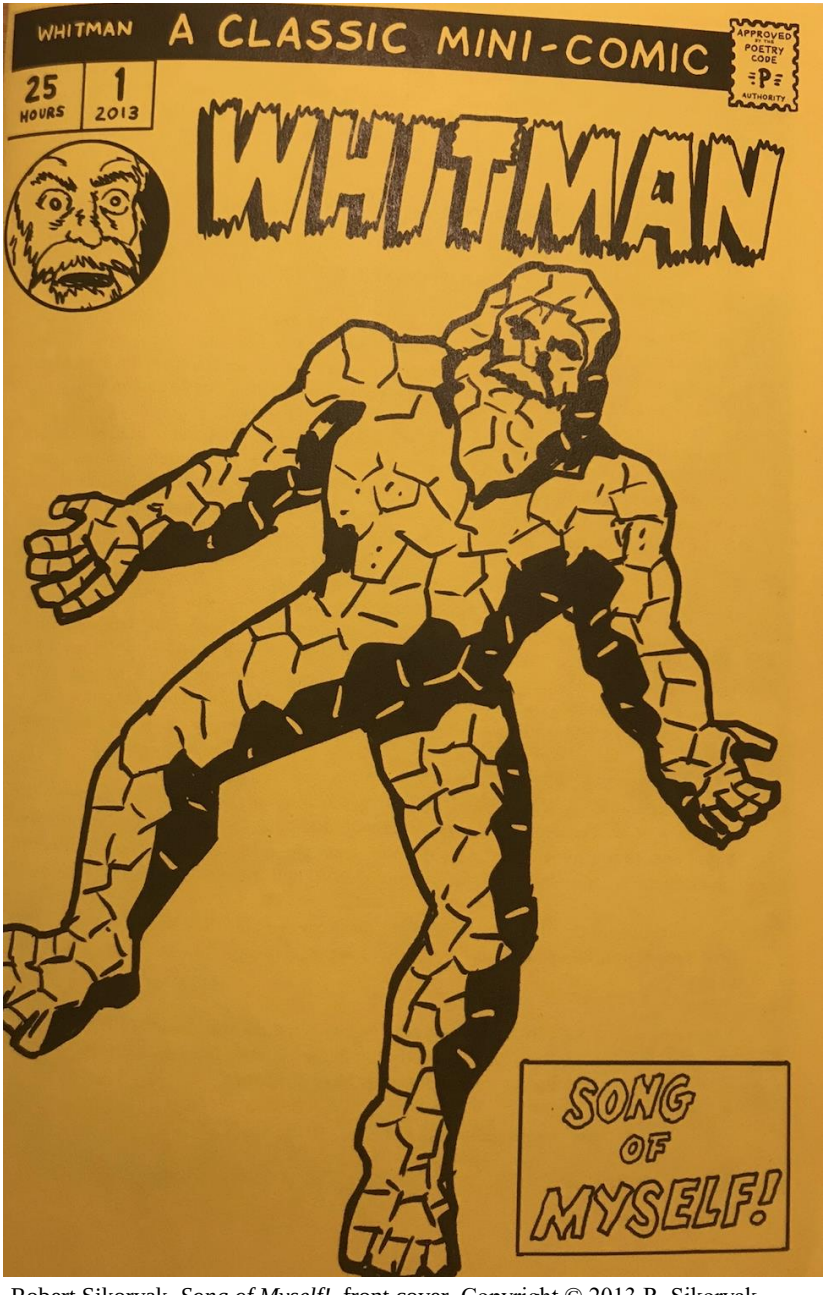

Fig. 2. Robert Sikoryak, *Song of Myself!*, front cover. Copyright © 2013 R. Sikoryak.

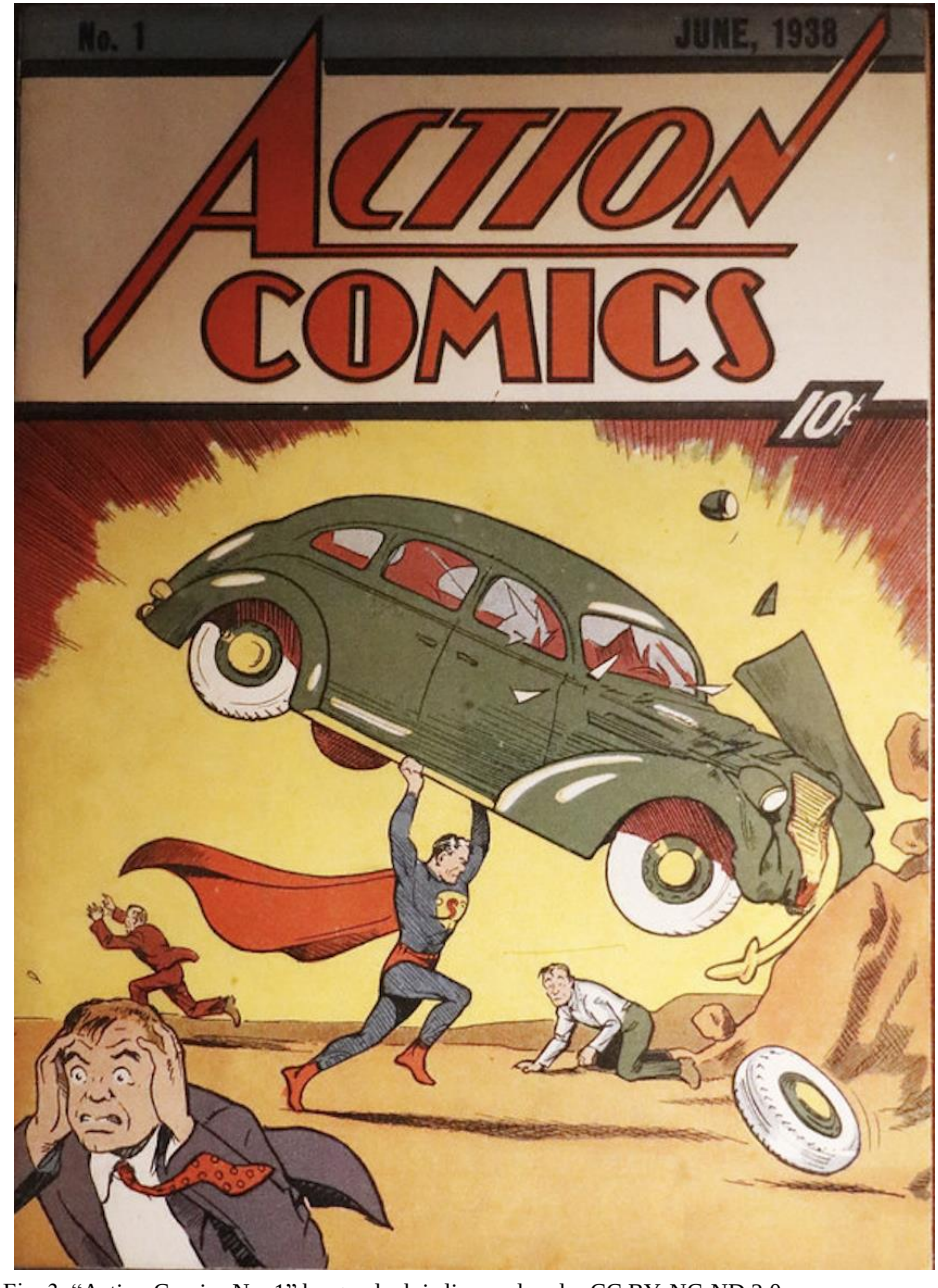

Fig. 3. “Action Comics No. 1” by greyloch is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Fig. 4. Robert Sikoryak, *Song of Myself!*, p. 5. Copyright © 2013 R. Sikoryak.

Fig. 5. Robert Sikoryak, *Song of Myself!*, p. 10. Copyright © 2013 R. Sikoryak.

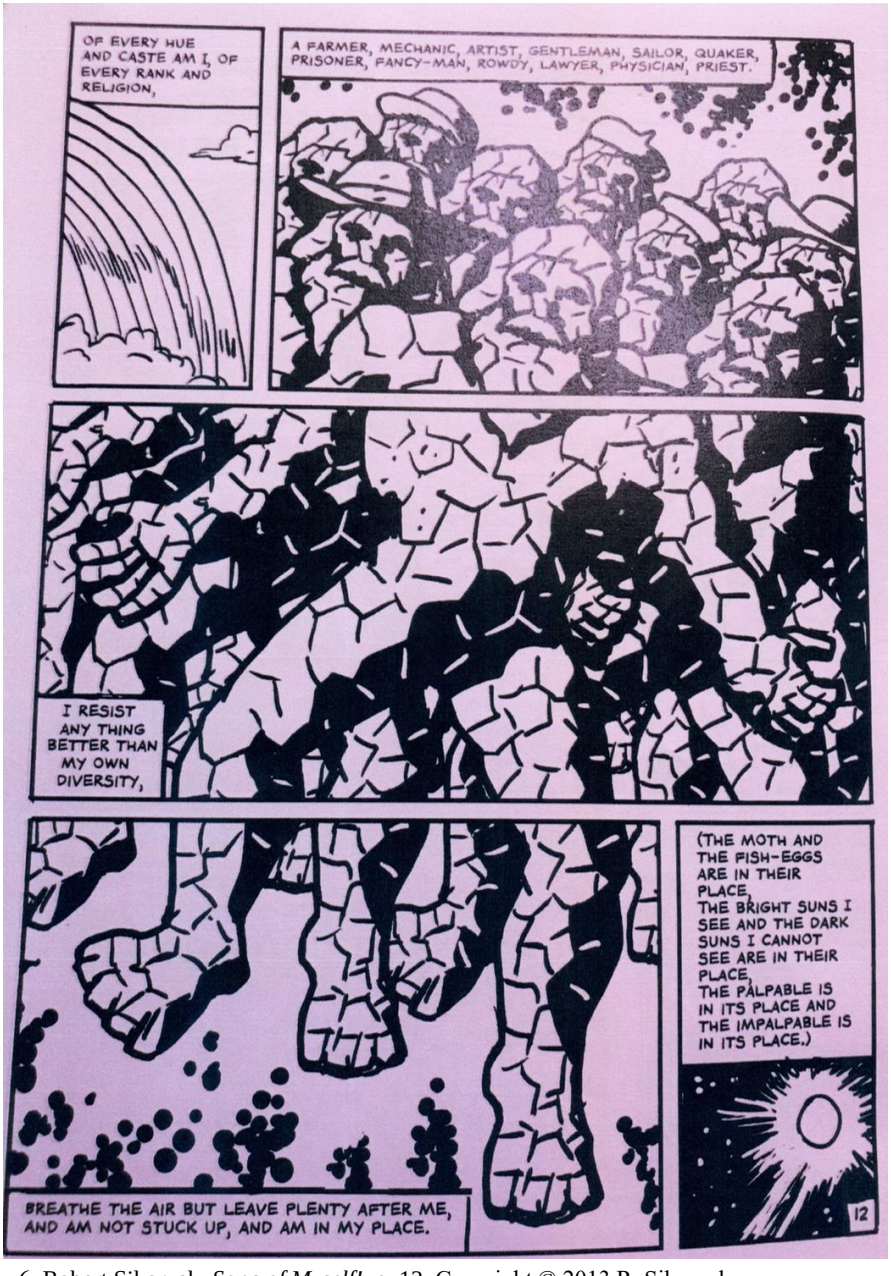

Fig. 6. Robert Sikoryak, *Song of Myself!*, p. 12. Copyright © 2013 R. Sikoryak.

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