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Kelly Scott Franklin  
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OUT OF PLACE: WALT WHITMAN AND THE LATIN AMERICAN AVANT-GARDES

by

Kelly Scott Franklin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in English  
in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

August 2014

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Ed Folsom  
Associate Professor Claire Fox

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Graduate College  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Kelly Scott Franklin

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement  
for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English at the August 2014 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Ed Folsom, Thesis Supervisor

---

Claire Fox, Thesis Supervisor

---

Miriam Thaggert

---

Stephen Voyce

---

Aníbal González-Pérez

To my parents, whose adventures led me not only to a life in literature but also to the joys  
of the Spanish language

To Madre Cabrini and Padre Escrivá, for their help and protection

Finally, *a mi querida esposa Jessica: te amo*

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## ABSTRACT

The poetry, prose, and personality of Walt Whitman have attained a truly global circulation, and scholarship continues to reveal his complex and lasting impact on literature, art, and politics around the world. This dissertation reveals Walt Whitman's extensive appropriation by the Latin American avant-garde, an artistic current that encompassed dozens of regional, national and transnational *vanguardia* movements across the Americas from roughly 1918 through the late 1930s. My work tells the story of how these pugnacious literary and artistic communities used Whitman as the raw material for a self-consciously "modern" art, as they circulated, adapted, and repurposed the US poet and his texts. The dissertation moves from south to north, beginning in Chile, proceeding to Nicaragua and Mexico, and ending with Latino writers in the United States. "Out of Place: Walt Whitman and the Latin American Avant-Gardes" argues that the literary and political appropriation of Whitman becomes a part of these movements' active participation in the hemispheric and global conversation of their day. What these aggressive avant-garde groups find useful, provocative, or generative in Whitman, then, offers us a unique perspective that cannot be left out of American literary studies. For as they wrestle with Whitman and the concept of "America," as they adapt Whitman into their notions of art, of nation and of language, and as they read him against the backdrop of globalization and modernity, a new Walt Whitman emerges, a *vanguardista* Whitman who sheds new light on the enduring relevance of his own radical project of making a poetry for the Americas.

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## INTRODUCTION

### “A CAIMAN ON BEACON STREET”: WHITMAN OUT OF PLACE

In a 1953 memoir, José Coronel Urtecho, the founder of Nicaragua’s avant-garde, recalled a US visitor’s shocked reaction upon finding a portrait of Walt Whitman at Coronel’s isolated estate along the San Juan river, near the border of Costa Rica. Coronel wrote that for his Yankee guest to find Whitman in rural Nicaragua “surprised him as much as finding a caiman on Beacon Street or a tapir grazing tranquilly in Boston Common” (*Rápido Tránsito* 27). This surrealist image vividly captures Whitman’s unusual presence in the Latin American avant-gardes: quite at home, even when most out of place. And it is this incongruous Whitman, roaming far from his natural habitat, that is my subject.

Latin American authors had already discovered Whitman even during his lifetime, thanks to exiled Cuban poet and journalist, José Martí, who saw Whitman deliver his homage to Abraham Lincoln in New York on 18 April, 1887. In his journalistic piece on the occasion, “El poeta Walt Whitman” [“The Poet Walt Whitman”], Martí praised the US poet in vivid terms for his “grandiose and sacerdotal maxims...like mouthfuls of light” (113).<sup>1</sup> He compared his work to “the sacred books of antiquity,” with “their prophetic language and robust poetry,” and insisted, “He must be studied, because even if he is not the poet of best taste, he is the most intrepid, embracing, and unrestrained of his time” (113, 115).<sup>2</sup> As Fernando Alegria points out, alongside his idealization of

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<sup>1</sup> “...grandiosos y sacerdotales apotegmas...a manera de bocanadas de luz...” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> “...los libros sagrados de la antigüedad...” “su profético lenguaje y robusta poesía...” “Hay que estudiarlo, porque si no es el poeta de mejor gusto, es el más intrépido, abarcador y desembarazado de su tiempo.”

Whitman, Martí also rightly discerned some of the major pillars of Whitman’s project, such as his love of the body, his spiritual vision of the world, and his celebration of labor and liberty (“Whitman in Spain” 93). Ever since Martí, Hispanophone writers have rightly picked up on these and other threads in the complex body of Whitman’s work.

Martí’s piece was also published in the paper *La Nación [The Nation]* of Buenos Aires in June of the same year, and read by the man who would become one of the most famous Latin American poets of all time, the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío (*Alegria Hispanoamerica* 251). In the second edition of his book *Azul [Blue]* in 1890, Darío dedicated a sonnet to Whitman, titled simply “Walt Whitman,” where he hailed the US poet as “beautiful like a patriarch, serene and holy” (“Walt Whitman”). Darío’s encomiastic poem further praises Whitman as “a new prophet” and a “Priest, who breathes a divine breath, announces the future, a better age” (“Walt Whitman”).<sup>3</sup> Announcing Whitman’s rule and dominion over modern poetry, Darío’s speaker exclaims: “Thus goes that poet on his path with the proud face of an emperor!” (“Walt Whitman”).<sup>4</sup> With this boost from Martí and Darío, Whitman’s entrance into the Hispanophone world was official, and over the subsequent decades, writers in the Americas and Spain began energetically to translate, imitate, eulogize, and converse with—and about—Whitman and his works.

In scholarship, this vast and intricate network of American hemispheric circulation and appropriation has not gone unnoticed: internationalist Whitman critics

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<sup>3</sup> “...como un profeta nuevo...” “Sacerdote, que alienta soplo divino, anuncia en el futuro, tiempo mejor.”

<sup>4</sup> “¡Así va ese poeta por su camino con su soberbio rostro de emperador!”

have rightly signaled the *modernistas*<sup>5</sup> Martí and Darío, as well as the one-time avant-gardists Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda as major Hispanophone authors grappling with Whitman's poetic project. Yet there remains *muchas tela que cortar*, “much more cloth to cut,” since after Martí and Darío, and alongside Borges and Neruda, there sprang up a vocal and variegated crop of Latin American avant-gardes, known as the *vanguardias*. These regional, national, and international artistic and literary movements flourished from roughly 1918 (less than thirty years after Whitman’s death) through the late 1930s, and many of them would themselves find something provocative or useful in Whitman. So, among many of these *vanguardias*, and frequently at the heart of them, we find Walt Whitman: circulated, repurposed, even occasionally condemned, but always present.

But the critical narrative has not yet successfully traced, in any substantial way, the appropriation of Whitman by these *vanguardia* movements. The great pioneer of Hispanophone Whitman studies, Fernando Alegría, in his monumental 1954 book *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* [*Walt Whitman in Latin America*], treats Neruda extensively, and does touch on several *vanguardistas* including the Spanish critic and poet Guillermo de Torre, the Uruguayan Carlos Sabat Ercasty, and the Chileans Pablo de Rohka and Vicente Huidobro.<sup>6</sup> But he shows a certain hesitation to engage the *vanguardias* seriously as distinct literary movements: he dismisses “the heavy baggage of superficiality hidden in” the different *ismos* or “isms” of the Hispanophone avant-gardes,

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<sup>5</sup> See below for a brief discussion of *modernismo* and its relations with the later avant-gardes.

<sup>6</sup> In his book, Alegría twice politely dismisses Vicente Huidobro, subject of my first chapter, as little more than an imitator of Whitman (*Hispanoamerica* 94, 341).

and labels them the imitative “minions” of Italian Futurism (155).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, both Alegria’s 1995 essay in *Walt Whitman and the World*, and the 1998 anthology of global responses to Whitman, *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, overlook the writings on Whitman from the avant-garde in Nicaragua, as well as Whitman’s appropriation by the Mexican *vanguardia* known as *Estridentismo* or Stridentism.<sup>8</sup> Although scholars of the Latin American avant-gardes frequently mention Whitman, there has been no attempt to systematically evaluate how these movements have appropriated, circulated, and responded to the US poet in their aesthetic, cultural, or political projects.<sup>9</sup> The present study proposes to do so.<sup>10</sup>

### **“Something Carried Forward, More Left Behind”:**

#### **Methods and Approach**

Fernando Alegria once famously claimed: “To study Walt Whitman in Latin American poetry is like looking for the footprints of a ghost that you can feel everywhere and see nowhere” (*Hispanoamérica* 9).<sup>11</sup> My study, however, begins with the premise that in fact Whitman’s presence in Latin America is anything but ghostly. Rather, it is precisely through his material and textual presences that Walt Whitman can be traced at

<sup>7</sup> “pesado bagaje de superficialidad que en ellos se ocultaba...” “...secuaces...”

<sup>8</sup> To be fair, the fragmentary and suggestive nature of *Estridentismo*’s engagement with Whitman would not lend itself to anthologizing, whereas the writings from members of the Nicaraguan avant-garde do.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards*, pages 130 and 161; Raskhin, *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, pages 53, 116, 184; Schneider *El Estridentismo O Una Literatura de la Estrategia*, page 36.

<sup>10</sup> One successful intervention into responses to Whitman associated with the Hispanophone avant-garde is Enrico Santí’s elegant and revealing essay “The Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin America,” which explores the complexities of Whitman’s presence in the writings of Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Luis Borges.

<sup>11</sup> “Estudiar a Walt Whitman en la poesía hispanoamericana es como buscar las huellas de un fantasma que se puede sentir en todas partes y ver en ninguna.” Alegria is quoting himself from his November 1944 article “Walt Whitman en Hispano América” in *Revista Iberoamericana*.

all: his portrait hanging on the wall of Coronel's rural study; his poetry translated and published in Germán List's Mexican magazine; his name printed repeatedly in Spanish avant-garde journals, or in the French and Spanish writings of the Chilean Vicente Huidobro; his well-worn book in the prison cell of Jimmy Santiago Baca, or tucked surreptitiously inside Julia Alvarez's catechism at Catholic school.<sup>12</sup>

These chapters follow Whitman's footsteps on a long and complex journey that takes him from Chile to New York. By moving from south to north, my dissertation argues against traditional narratives of hemispheric American studies in which US culture merely spreads southward to inspire reaction or imitation in the Americas. Instead, I posit the Latin American *vanguardias'* active and strategic appropriation of US authors and texts, as part of their significant contribution to the hemispheric and global discourse of their day. In the chapters that follow, I combine comparative American studies, new historicist methodology, close readings of central texts, and—in two instances—my own interviews to present four carefully-linked and provocatively-structured case studies that reveal the Hispanophone avant-garde's complex circulation of Walt Whitman's poetry, thought, and personality across the Americas.

However, even as Americanists like Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2002), Anna Brickhouse (2004), Jesse Alemán (2006) and others reveal the myriad textual networks crossing and linking the borders, cultures, and languages of the Americas, my own exploration of the poetic relations between Whitman and hemispheric Hispanophone

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<sup>12</sup> In "Undercover Poet," Alvarez writes:  
"In my Catholic school, I'd tuck my *Leaves of Grass* inside my opened catechism book—  
*How many persons in one God?* I'd yawn and end up poring through the lustier poems omitted from our Whitman sampler." (130)

writers promises to be a fertile but fraught line of inquiry. Fertile, because it provides an alternative model for literary and cultural research, at a moment when the discipline once misleadingly-titled “English” is casting a far wider and much more international net; fraught, because of the serious methodological challenges that face comparative Americanist, hemispheric, and transnational studies. Robert McKee Irwin warns of the “deeply ingrained hierarchy of knowledge production that privileges research carried out under the auspices of US institutions that is published in English by US-based publishers over the work of Latin America-based scholars published in Latin America and in Spanish,” and critiques US American studies’ “long history of monolingualism and very little experience of taking seriously any scholarship carried out abroad” (Irwin 524). More recently, Ali Behdad echoes this criticism of disciplinary provincialism, lamenting “the persistence of a monolingual and exceptionalist approach to literature in the field of American studies” (Behdad, 609). Brian T. Edwards further charges that the methodology of US American studies “unwittingly reproduces logic about US power on the geopolitical stage that delimits the potential critique of American exceptionalism,” because American studies still remain “[b]uttressed institutionally by a limiting monolingualism at the heart of the field, and policed by arbiters of what counts as Americanist work” (Edwards 235).

Edwards, however, proposes as a solution a model that transcends an exclusively historicized reading of a literary work, “not only to develop careful readings of multiple points of encounter, but also to challenge the vernacular tradition of reading American texts for simple, nationally bound meaning” (Edwards 233, 235). Glossing Silverstein and Urban, Edwards argues that “[t]exts as evidence of cultural meaning are not merely

codes that, when decoded, help us understand history, but rather processes by which meaning is constantly created in social interactions” and that the “natural history of textuality” is precisely this more complex “process wherein social actors apparently lift texts from contexts, but where discourse is de-centered, and then recentered in another context—something carried forward, more left behind” (Edwards 233, 234). The present study traces just such a process, as we look at a Walt Whitman transposed into the aesthetic projects, print communities, and political and social ideologies of the Hispanophone avant-gardes. In each of these encounters, we will see, as Edwards describes it, what the *vanguardias* “left behind” from Whitman’s work, and what it was that they “carried forward” (234).

### **Towards a Landscape of the Avant-Garde**

In working toward an analysis of the present subject, I have chosen the term “landscape” to describe the variegated theoretical territory of the avant-garde, because it captures some of the challenges of defining the term. From a fixed point of observation, a landscape may be just that: *a landscape*, possessing a level of unified wholeness that can be embraced in a single glance. We can comfortably and even accurately premise certain things about that landscape; it may be arid, or mountainous, or tropical, or heavily forested, or—as it was in the case of the avant-garde—it may even be war-torn. Yet within that one landscape we see not only the dramatic rise and fall of topography, but also the wild diversity of life forms and ecological habitats, not to mention the subtle differences in lighting or coloration. Acknowledging this sustained tension within the fascinating aesthetics, history, and identity of the avant-garde, it will be worth approaching a working definition of “avant-garde” before exploring how avant-garde

ideas and actions were manifested in the Hispanophone world.

Scholars of the avant-garde such as Renato Poggiali and Matei Calinescu have described in detail how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this one-time military term became a metaphor for sociopolitical radicalism, then—by proxy—for the literary and artistic wing of that radicalism, and then finally for the experimental artistic movement that broke away from its earlier subservience to sociopolitical ends (Poggiali 8-12; Calinescu 100-113). As Poggiali summarizes it, “what had up to then been a secondary, figurative meaning became instead the primary, in fact the only, meaning” (12): “the isolated image,” he continues, “and the abbreviated term *avant-garde* became, without qualification, another synonym for the artistic *avant-garde*, while the political notion functioned almost solely as rhetoric and was no longer used exclusively by those faithful to the revolutionary and subversive ideal” (12). Calinescu writes that subsequently, “[b]y the second decade of our century [the twentieth], *avant-garde*, as an artistic concept, had become comprehensive enough to designate...*all the new schools* whose aesthetic programs were defined, by and large, by their rejection of the past and by the cult of the new” (117, emphasis in original).

The historically-situated evolution of the term on the one hand, counterpoised against its very broad definition as an aesthetics of “rejection of the past” and of “the cult of the new” on the other hand, frames the difficulty of theorizing the nature of the *avant-garde*. When we understand it as a historical epoch, this seemingly neat periodization becomes problematic when we consider that artists, writers, filmmakers, and other producers of culture have continued to identify with—and in a certain sense continue to be—“avant-garde” well into the present day. If this is true, then we might be tempted to

understand avant-garde only ahistorically, as a dispositional attitude, a way of being and acting, an experimental, rebellious orientation that rejected tradition and sought novelty in the realm of cultural production or aesthetics. Calinescu acknowledges this latter position, writing, “[I] logically, every literary or artistic style should have its avant-garde, for there is nothing more natural than to think of the avant-garde artists as being in advance of their own time and preparing the conquest of new forms of expression” (119). However, Calinescu continues, “the history of the term in its cultural sense...points to the contrary. The avant-garde does not announce one style or another; it is in itself a style, or better, an antistyle” (119). He writes:

Here again we should make it clear that the avant-garde proper does not exist before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although every epoch has its rebels and negators. The most prominent students of the avant-garde tend to agree that its appearance is historically connected with the moment when some socially “alienated” artists felt the need to disrupt and completely overthrow the whole bourgeois system of values, with all its philistine pretensions to universality.<sup>13</sup> (119)

So, if we can think of the avant-garde both as a broad, diverse historical movement and as an aesthetic ideology with discernible principles overlapping across the countless “isms,” what are the aesthetic characteristics of the avant-garde?

In his book, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Poggiali offers five such qualities. The first he calls “Dehumanization,” an aesthetic of “deformation,” especially of living beings (175, 176). This tendency, for Poggiali, constitutes both an embrace of stylistic primitivism and a rebellion against the ways that modern technology and technique make so-called mimetic art easier to execute (179). The second characteristic he calls “Cerebralism,” a “*sui generis* intellectualism” (183, 187). This “scientific spirit” that,

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<sup>13</sup> In this analysis, Calinescu is in line with Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which sees one of the main defining characteristics of the avant-garde as its questioning of bourgeois assumptions about the work of art and the art establishment.

contrary to historically earlier forms of intellectualism is “nonmystical, nihilistic,” finds some of its manifestations in the representation of abstract ideas, geometric shapes, scientific and even machinist imagery (185, 187, 183-189). The third characteristic he identifies as “Voluntarism” (183). Poggiali describes how “within modern culture a romantic and Schopenhauerian concept is in the process of displacing the classical, Christian, Stoic, and humanistic concept of the will” (189). For the avant-garde, then, “[t]he hypothesis of will power as a conscious, rational, and autonomous faculty has thus yielded to the opposite hypothesis of an unconscious, irrational, and automatic will” (189). We can see this in action in what Poggiali calls the “willfulness” of some avant-garde projects, and in practices such as the ironically deliberate “automatism” of automatic writing, chance-generated poems, etc. (189, 190).

Poggiali describes the fourth quality of the avant-garde as the “metaphysics of the metaphor” (196): “The modern metaphor tends to divorce the idea and the figure,” he argues, “to annul in the last-mentioned any reference to a reality other than its own self” (197). He further describes “a metaphorical conception of language, considered not as the figuration, but as the transfiguration, of the real” (197). “Poetry and language,” he writes, “aspire to transcend the world of the senses, to attain a superreality which is at once a sublimation and a negation of human and terrestrial reality” (197). This transcendent drive for “superreality” flows naturally into, and from, the fifth quality Poggiali identifies in the aesthetics of the avant-garde, what he calls the “mystique of purity,” which “aspires to abolish the discursive and syntactic element, to liberate art from any connection with psychological and empirical reality, to reduce every work to the intimate laws of its own expressive essence or to the given absolutes of its own genre or means”

(199, 201).<sup>14</sup>

Although he does not list it as a major characteristic—perhaps because he is highly critical of it—Poggiali elsewhere mentions another aesthetic quality of the avant-garde: the preoccupation with the sights, sounds, and artifacts of modernity (216-220). Poggiali evinces no sympathy for this “blind adoration of the idols and fetishes of our time,” which “cheapens and vulgarizes modernity into what Marinetti called, encomiastically, modernolatry...” (218). In this line of thinking, Poggiali cites Whitman as having attempted to “look ingenuously and freshly, with sympathy and enthusiasm, at certain aspects of modern life and draw from them a new poetic magic, new fables, and fantasies” (218). “The attempt,” he writes, “anticipated by Walt Whitman and Verhaeren and already begun by the futurists, measured by its deeds, ended up in almost complete failure” (218). As we shall see in Chapter Three, the Mexican Stridentists might not agree with his assessment.

### **The Avant-Gardes and *Las Vanguardias***

Whether or not Poggiali was right that the Futurists failed in their project, Futurism in many ways constitutes one of the primary sparks—and perhaps even the originary model—of the global avant-gardes. In 1909, the Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published his “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.” The highly performative text, part narrative and part numbered manifesto, proclaims the inauguration of a new era. In brash and vivid prose, Marinetti celebrates rebellion, violence, the power of machines,

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<sup>14</sup> However, Poggiali admits: “Certain poetic currents originating from the surrealist experiment are enough to demonstrate how, in contact with and contrast to the mystique of purity, what is actually an opposite mystique at times affirms itself: an exalting of impurity and hybridism which is not limited to a mixture of materials or an eclecticism of forms” (203). However, he writes, “despite its chaotic and hybrid nature, surrealist poetry also aspired, in its better moments, to attain a state of grace and purity or, better, of purity and innocence” (204). In this way it enacts, albeit differently, the quest for aesthetic purity.

and the vitality of industry:

1. We intend to sing to the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.
2. Courage, boldness, and rebelliousness will be the essential elements of our poetry.
3. Up to now literature has exalted contemplative stillness, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch.
4. We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that glistens with large pipes resembling a serpent with explosive breath...a roaring automobile that seems to ride on grapeshot—this is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*. (51)

Marjorie Perloff writes of Marinetti: “As a lyric poet, he was a mediocre late Symbolist; as a thinker, he was almost wholly derivative, his extravagant statements being easily traceable to Nietzsche and Henri Bergson, to Alfred Jarry and Georges Sorel. But as what we now call a conceptual artist, Marinetti was incomparable” (84). Indeed, as Rainey and Perloff describe, Futurism very quickly proved an international sensation, and went on to become a major source of both controversy and influence, as its spirit, principles, and methods shaped many of the countless avant-garde movements that would spring up around the world (Rainey 1; Perloff 56-57).

Latin American writers were keenly attuned to the advent of this new aesthetics. A Spanish version of Marinetti’s manifesto was even published in Argentina in 1909, thanks to the translation of none other than the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, and Marinetti would visit South America—to some acclamation and to a great deal of scorn—in the 1920s (Pérsico 92; Osorio 34). Many of the founding figures from the Latin American *vanguardias* did in fact go to Europe themselves, and became contributing members of the avant-garde there. The Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, who is credited with inaugurating the Spanish-language avant-garde, moved to Paris in 1916, where the next

year he founded the avant-garde journal *Nord-Sud* along with French poet Pierre Reverdy, and quickly became friends with important innovators like Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, André Breton, Pablo Picasso, and many others (Goic, *Cronología 1389-1390*). Highly influential in his own right, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges also lived in Europe from 1914 to 1921, where he associated with the Spanish avant-garde known as *Ultraísmo* or Ultraismo, and founded a branch of the movement in Argentina when he returned to South America (Timeline). Other *vanguardistas*, such as the Mexican painter Diego Rivera, the Peruvian poet César Vallejo, and the Brazilian Oswald de Andrade, also traveled and lived in Europe, where they absorbed—and contributed to—European avant-garde currents before and between the World Wars.

Given this extensive transatlantic contact, the international or hemispheric origins of the *vanguardias*, then, were—and are—an obviously contested territory, obscured by issues of colonialism as well as by mythologies of Latin American autochthony. However, although they actively engaged with the cultural production and aesthetic ideas of their European counterparts, the *vanguardias* emerged as a decidedly Latin American phenomenon, with decidedly Latin American projects. Vicky Unruh argues the *vanguardias* “were unquestionably stimulated in part by the European avant-gardes,” but that “Latin American vanguardism” nonetheless “grew out of and responded to the continent’s own cultural concerns” (*Contentious* 3). She goes on to trace how circumstances such as the Russian Revolution, the effects of urban growth, greater Latin American integration into the global economy, and widespread social and political reform led to a unique and “pervasive activist spirit” that permeated the *vanguardias*

(*Contentious* 3-8, 4). Fernando J. Rosenberg argues that rather than seeking to define the development of the *vanguardias* in “native or foreign” terms, we can in fact see “a remarkable simultaneity that cannot be explained away by any account of the specific influences and European journeys of individual artists” (14); Rosenberg further argues that the *vanguardias* used their unique geopolitical position on the so-called periphery of the West, to “undertake a critique of modernity and its narratives, including those of ‘international’ modernism and its avant-gardes” (2).

We can see, in a dramatic fashion, an example of how the *vanguardias* positioned themselves in relation to the European avant-gardes, in an iconic text from the Brazilian *vanguardista* Oswald de Andrade. Scholar of the vanguardia Jorge Schwartz describes de Andrade’s “Manifiesto Antropófago” [“Anthropophagous Manifesto”]:

The national/cosmopolitan dilemma gets resolved by the contact with the revolutionary techniques of the European avant-garde, and by the perception of an obligation to reaffirm national values in a modern language. Oswald transforms the noble savage of Rousseau into an evil savage, devourer of Europe, capable of assimilating the other in order to reverse the traditional colonizer/colonized relation. (172)<sup>15</sup>

In his cannibal manifesto, de Andrade indeed executes this reversal: describing the colonization of the New World, he writes: “But it was not the crusaders who came. It was the fugitives of a civilization that we are eating, because we are strong and vengeful like the Jabutí [tortoise]” (178).<sup>16</sup> “Anthropophagy,” he asserts, “Absorption of the sacred

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<sup>15</sup> “El dilema nacional/cosmopolita es resuelto por el contacto con las revolucionarias técnicas de la vanguardia europea, y por la percepción de la obligación de reafirmar los valores nacionales en un lenguaje moderno. Oswald transforma al buen salvaje de Rousseau en un mal salvaje, devorador del europeo, capaz de asimilar al otro para dar vuelta a la tradicional relación colonizador/colonizado.”

<sup>16</sup> “Pero no fueron los cruzados quienes vinieron. Fueron fugitivos de una civilización que estamos comiendo, porque somos fuertes y vengativos como el Jabutí.”

enemy. To transform him into a totem” (179).<sup>17</sup> “Our independence,” he continues, “has not yet been proclaimed” (180).<sup>18</sup> So it is that cannibalization becomes a working metaphor for the *vanguardias*’ use of European avant-garde texts, ideas, and strategies. But as I hope to show, it also becomes a working metaphor for their complex appropriation of Walt Whitman.

Of course, this appropriation was complicated by the fact that Whitman had been introduced into the Hispanophone world so encomiastically by Martí and Darío, two founding fathers of Latin American *modernismo*.<sup>19</sup> This literary movement flourished in Spain and Latin America from the 1880s through the 1920s, and constituted the generation against which many of the *vanguardias* would rebel.<sup>20</sup> *Modernismo* was a movement that successfully staked a claim for Latin American literature in a global context (González *Companion* 1; Washborne xiii): drawing on French Symbolism, the *modernistas* were a prolific cosmopolitan movement that produced poetry, prose, and also many journalistic *crónicas*, “hybrid” texts that fused mass media reportage with conscious artistic creation (González *Companion* 24).<sup>21</sup> The manifold styles and projects of *modernista* authors make generalizations problematic, but Ignacio Díaz Ruiz has described *modernismo* as “[a] generation united by the principles of novelty, originality,

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<sup>17</sup> “Antropofagia. Absorción del enemigo sacro. Para transformarlo en tótem.”

<sup>18</sup> “Nuestra independencia todavía no fue proclamada.”

<sup>19</sup> Latin American *modernismo* is not to be confused with either the Brazilian avant-garde movement also called *modernismo* or with Anglophone Modernism. In the following brief analysis of this movement, I rely heavily on Aníbal González’s *A Companion to Spanish American Modernismo*, especially pages 1-9.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, José Coronel’s irreverent “Oda a Rubén Darío” [“Ode to Rubén Darío”] or Joaquín Pasos’ equally irreverent treatment of Whitman and Darío in “No he leído a Walt Whitman” [“I Have Not Read Walt Whitman”].

<sup>21</sup> For an eloquent discussion of *modernismo* as the intersection of two conflicting cultural projects, see Julio Ramos’ *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*. Tr. John D. Blanco. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

and careful attention to form” (24).<sup>22</sup>

The poetic and literary imagery of *modernismo* was often composed of many elements at which *vanguardistas* would later shudder:

...images from heraldry and nobility (viscounts, the fleur-de-lis); the swan, with its multiple possible readings as androgynous, ambiguous, pure, and aloof; the peacock....liminal words and objects (moonlit paths, wings, a city in midair, a nest of angels);.... Precious gems (diamond, pearl, amethyst); the vocabulary of interior decoration (silks, crystals, porcelain, crepe, fans, weaponry, all emphasizing lightness, beauty, or the archetypal.... (Washborne xxx)

And yet, in the *modernismo* of Darío, Martí, and many others, we find a serious cosmopolitan spirit, a preoccupation with language and form, a valorization of a uniquely Latin American literary project, treatments of indigenous themes and even of the urban space (Díaz 61; Washborne xii). As such, we can take with a grain of salt the *vanguardista* protestations of an utter divorce from *modernismo*, and see the movement as what González has called “a sort of prelude to the Avant-Garde” (*Companion* 1).<sup>23</sup> With this connection in mind, we can consider how, thanks to Martí and Darío, Walt Whitman himself was very much a part of the *vanguardias’ modernista* inheritance.

### **Moving from South to North:**

#### **The Sequence of Chapters**

Chapter One, “‘Without Being Walt Whitman’: Vicente Huidobro’s Whitman and the Poetics of Vision,” argues that the Chilean poet, cosmopolite, and *enfant terrible* Vicente Huidobro inaugurated the Spanish-language avant-gardes using a technique he

<sup>22</sup> “Una generación integrada por los principios de novedad, originalidad y cuidado formal.”

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, even Poggioli, although qualifying it with the adjectives “discreet, timid, or moderate,” identifies Latin American *modernismo* as one of the “avant-garde tendencies to appear since the end of the nineteenth century” (218).

stole from Whitman. In his groundbreaking 1918 poem, *Ecuatorial*, which I argue is based on Whitman’s “Salut Au Monde,” Huidobro took from Whitman an all-embracing sight to shape his simultaneist and cubist poetry. But Whitman’s all-seeing aesthetics threatened Huidobro’s own avant-garde poetic movement, *Creacionismo*, leading the Chilean to reject Whitman’s poetic vision in his 1931 *Altazor*, where his poetic speaker describes himself as “The one who has seen everything, who knows all secrets, without being Walt Whitman” (734.100-3).<sup>24</sup> Whitman’s poetic “I” could “contain multitudes,” but Huidobro’s poet must instead be utterly emptied out in order to create a truly “modern” art. The deep political tensions inherent in this vision further emerged when the aging Huidobro, facing World War II and the imperialist shadow of the US, later wrote back to Whitman to further qualify and clarify what this poetic and political vision might mean for “America.”

Chapter Two moves north to Nicaragua, where a politically-invested late avant-garde movement of Catholic fascists incorporated Whitman into its resistance of US intervention. “‘Nicaraguan Words’: Coronel’s *Vanguardia* and the Politics of Whitman’s Language” argues that the movement’s founder José Coronel Urtecho, who once claimed, “I can almost say that I learned to read English reading Poe and Whitman,” used Whitman’s notion of an “American” poetic language to fight for Nicaraguan autonomy (“Americanismo” 26).<sup>25</sup> I argue that this group positioned itself against the military, financial, and cultural encroachments of the US by appropriating Whitman’s American “language experiment” to promote local, vernacular and indigenous languages. Finally,

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<sup>24</sup> “Aquél que todo lo ha visto, que conoce todos los secretos sin ser Walt Whitman, pues jamás he tenido una barba blanca como las bellas enfermeras y los arroyos helados.”

<sup>25</sup> “Mi actitud personal hacia los Estados Unidos fue mucho años ambivalente: me encontraba atraído, casi diría fascinado, y al mismo tiempo repelido por ellos.”

after the movement's authoritarian, anti-US politics led its members paradoxically to support both the *guerrilla* Augusto Sandino and the dictator who had him killed, Anastasio Somoza García, the movement's vocal role in politics came to an end. But Coronel would return to Whitman's work, to probe his vision of democracy, and to seriously question its potential role in the American hemisphere. Subsequently, José Coronel's one-time protégé, the poet, priest, and Sandinista Ernesto Cardenal would himself turn to Whitman in his own poetic and political struggles for Nicaragua's future.

Chapter Three, ““The Exaltation of Modern Life”: Whitman Among the Mexican Stridentists,” argues that a radical Mexican movement known as *Estridentismo* (literally “Strident-ism”) used Whitman in its project of modernizing Mexican culture in the 1920s. The Stridentists blended Mexican Revolutionary ideology with youthful rebellion and avant-garde aesthetics, in a poetry that celebrated the urbe, the machine, and the worker. Led by law student Manuel Maples Arce and the brawling Leftist journalist Germán List Arzubide, the Stridentists used Whitman as a symbol of modernity in their struggle to accelerate, and to understand, the impending wave of modernization that was, for Mexico, still very much in the future. Finally, this chapter reveals an unnoticed link between Whitman, the Stridentists, and US photographer Edward Weston, who spent time among the Stridentists and whose industrial photographs were published in their magazines. Back in the US years later, Weston returned to the same urban-industrial Whitman valued by Stridentist aesthetics, when he shot pictures for a 1942 illustrated edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, while his nation prepared for the Second World War.

Chapter Four re-enters the US to reveal how Latino poets since the Chicano movement of the 1960s have engaged Whitman in US literature and culture. “‘I, Too, Sing América’: Three Latino Poets Confronting Whitman’s Legacy” makes the case for understanding their movements as heirs of the avant-gardes, and takes as case studies the work of Chicano poet José Montoya, pinto poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, and the Dominicana Julia Alvarez. Even as José Montoya critiqued Whitman’s blindness to the social injustices of the twentieth century, this founding father of the *Movimiento Chicano* nonetheless saw value in Whitman’s willingness to speak for, and as one of, the marginalized. Jimmy Santiago Baca criticizes Whitman’s American exceptionalism for ignoring many of the evils of the nineteenth-century US, but Whitman’s boldness, his commitment to equality, and his spiritual and poetic vision of the world still inspired and shaped Baca’s early work. Julia Alvarez, although resistant to Whitman’s masculine poetics, nonetheless found a welcome acceptance in Whitman’s book, finding her own place and voice within the accepting multitudes of his “American” diversity. Even as they confront Whitman, then, these minority writers utilize his inclusive poetic voice to challenge any claim that they are “out of place” in US literature or culture. Whitman, whose canonical status often obscures the radical marginality of his person and his project, becomes for them a speaker and an advocate, a poet of the displaced and the disenfranchised, whose rebellious, experimental power becomes a means for them to write back to his own “America.”

My conclusion, “‘A Tapir Grazing Tranquilly on Boston Common’: Rereading Whitman,” argues that these avant-garde appropriations of Whitman in fact offer Americanists new ways to read his work. Although Huidobro found Whitman’s global

vision innovative but threatening, we can see Whitman's writings not only straining to maintain the Union but also to expand his ideal "America" to a world unified by interpersonal democratic love. That the Nicaraguan avant-garde could use Whitman's language experiment to resist the United States reveals Whitman's own literary and linguistic resistance to European literary dominance in the US, in texts such as his posthumous *An American Primer*. Since the Mexican Stridentists appropriated Whitman into their vivid depictions of modernity, it is significant that Whitman himself considered *Leaves of Grass* to be a thoroughly "modern" book: what did Whitman imagine modernity to mean? Furthermore, the fact that US Latino poets see in Whitman a powerful, if problematic, means to critique the dominant national culture, reveals in turn the extent to which Whitman's subversive, inclusive project sought to welcome all minorities, especially immigrants.

Finally, I gesture briefly towards the diverse and ongoing Hispanophone literary conversation with Whitman in the ever-shifting, ephemeral, personal and professional online media. In these popular digital-textual communities, Whitman has indeed continued to find resonance with the those people he hailed in his “Poets to Come”:

POETS to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before  
known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me. (175)

"I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future," he insists, and concludes the poem, "Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you" (175).

## CHAPTER ONE

### “WITHOUT BEING WALT WHITMAN”: VICENTE HUIDOBRO’S WHITMAN AND THE POETICS OF VISION

On 1 April 1917, the Madrid paper *La Correspondencia de España* hailed a recent arrival on the European avant-garde scene, a writer “formed in the den of Nietzsche’s centaur and in Emerson’s amorous daisy-fields, and who, before coming face-to-face with Walt Whitman’s new dawn, long dwelt ecstatically before the ancient zodiacs of the Oriental temples” (Cansinos Assens 6).<sup>26</sup> The subject of such praise was the twenty-four year-old Chilean poet, Vicente Huidobro, the cosmopolitan *enfant terrible* had moved to Europe just five months earlier, after his aggressive promotion of vanguard aesthetics had brought him renown in South America.

In Europe, he established himself almost overnight at the heart of the Parisian avant-garde, rubbing shoulders with artists like Picasso, Apollinaire, and Reverdy. Until his death in 1948, the publicity-loving Huidobro kept himself in the news: fleeing British authorities in Ireland, reportedly kidnapped and beaten in Paris, running for president in Chile, carrying on a scandalous and highly public affair with a young woman he had stolen away to Europe when her parents sought his life, all the while writing in Spanish, French, and English, and publishing plays, poems, novels, screenplays, even opera librettos. When the Second World War came, he could be found on the front lines, at the fall of Berlin, as a foreign correspondent for the Allies, where he was wounded and claimed to have scavenged the personal telephone of Hitler himself, as part of the spoils of war (*Goic Poesía de Vicente Huidobro* 32).

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<sup>26</sup> “. . . formado por igual en el antro de centauro de Nietzsche y en las amorosas praderas de margaritas de Emerson, y que antes de mirar cara a cara la nueva aurora de Walt Whitman se extasió largo tiempo ante los antiguos zodiacos de los templos de Oriente.”

It may seem ironic that the author of the 1 April piece, Rafael Cansinos Assens, would pull Huidobro—an artist so deeply invested in the risk-taking new projects of the avant-gardes—back to the already-then-venerable nineteenth-century figures of Nietzsche, Emerson, and Whitman. Indeed, glib comparisons to Walt Whitman would become almost a rite of initiation for twentieth-century Hispanophone poets. Yet in this case the reference carried real weight. The very next year, Cansinos Assens would found an avant-garde movement whose members would credit Whitman’s “prolific seed” for the new aesthetics sweeping Europe, and would refashion the US poet as a symbol of poetic and techno-industrial modernity (del Valle 13; Montes 74),<sup>27</sup> furthermore, Huidobro himself had in 1916 published a book of poems echoing Whitman’s “Children of Adam,” and recasting the biblical Adam as a secular, sexually-potent Original Man.

Since Latin American writers were among the first to engage Whitman abroad, the *modernistas* José Martí and Rubén Darío, and the avant-gardists Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda have emerged in international scholarship as major figures grappling with Whitman and his poetic project. Few scholars, however, have acknowledged the links between Whitman and Huidobro; for those that have, the analysis has remained fragmentary and superficial. For example, in a section devoted to Latin-American avant-garde literature, Alegría’s landmark study *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* [*Walt Whitman in Latin America*] politely dismissed Huidobro’s literary importance, and insisted that “in reality, Vicente Huidobro did little more than reaffirm the ideas expressed by Emerson in ‘The Poet’ and repeated by Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*”

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<sup>27</sup> “ . . . semilla prolífica . . . ”

(341).<sup>28</sup> Alegría's later essay for Ed Folsom's and Gay Wilson Allen's 1995 *Walt Whitman and the World* again gave Huidobro a mere paragraph and quoted only one of the several important mentions of Whitman in Huidobro's work ("Whitman in Spain" 92-93). Since then, the Whitman-Huidobro connection garnered little additional attention.<sup>29</sup> In one small section of his 1999 article "Walt Whitman en la poesía chilena del siglo XX" ["Walt Whitman in Twentieth-Century Chilean Poetry"], Andrés Morales briefly compares oceanic imagery in Whitman and Huidobro, but sees only echoes of Whitman's language and images (181-183). In short, we are left with a general impression that Huidobro both used and responded to Whitman's poetry, but a regrettably vague notion of exactly how and why. This gap is all the more inexplicable not only because it was Huidobro who inaugurated the Hispanophone poetic avant-garde with his revolutionary poem *Ecuatorial* (1918), but also because he represents a major point of entry for Whitman's comprehensive poetic vision into the new aesthetics of Europe and Latin America.

Yet when Rafael Cansinos Assens hailed Huidobro in 1917, the Chilean poet's explosive avant-garde career had only just begun, and he would soon take Whitman's poetics of vision into a radically new context, into the heart of the Hispanophone avant-gardes. This chapter demonstrates how Huidobro took from Whitman's poem "Salut au Monde" an elevated and all-embracing poetics of sight which he used to create his

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<sup>28</sup> "...afirmando que su teoría estética venía a revolucionar el arte contemporáneo." "En realidad, Vicente Huidobro no hizo sino reafirmar las ideas expresadas por Emerson en 'El Poeta' y repetidas por Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*."

<sup>29</sup> Although it does not deal with Huidobro specifically, it is worth mentioning Enrico Santí's elegant and revealing essay "The Accidental Tourist: Walt Whitman in Latin America," in *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 156-176. Santí explores the complexities of Whitman's presence in the writings of Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, and Jorge Luis Borges.

revolutionary *Ecuatorial*; but Whitman's all-seeing verse actually posed an inherent aesthetic threat to the very movement Huidobro had so vociferously founded, leading the Chilean to reject Whitman and his poetic sight in his masterwork, *Altazor*. Whitman's poetic speaker could "contain multitudes," capturing all the details of the whole world in instant juxtaposition, but Huidobro's ideal Creationist poet must empty himself of the world's multitudes, to sing instead the new poetic world created within. This complex literary and textual relationship reveals Huidobro's serious aesthetic engagement with nineteenth-century US literature; at the same time, this early *vanguardista* adaptation also suggests some of the broader, paradoxically generative yet threatening possibilities of Whitman's widespread appropriation into the Hispanophone avant-gardes.<sup>30</sup>

### **Seeing Like Walt: The Cosmic-politan Vision**

Nineteenth-century US literature was fascinated by an authorial vantage point of vista—an elevated, sometimes cosmic position allowing the speakers to see the changing world below them, and to approach the celestial realm from which they drew inspiration and clarity to understand that world.<sup>31</sup> Advances in transportation at the end of the eighteenth century had also brought real access to this elevated perspective in the moveable form of the hot-air balloon, an invention which gained special historical prominence in the nineteenth century, as the Civil War saw the first balloon reconnaissance by men such as John LaMountain and Thaddeus Lowe (Green). In

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<sup>30</sup> I use the term "Hispanophone" because it includes Spanish-speakers of Latin America as well as Spain, since Huidobro participated heavily in the Spanish-language avant-gardes in both the Americas and in Europe.

<sup>31</sup> Huidobro began reading nineteenth-century US literature early in his career: in the prologue to his 1916 *Adán (Adam)*, published in Santiago, Chile, just before he left for Europe, Huidobro translated a passage from Emerson's 1844 essay "The Poet," having encountered Emerson, as did many of his fellow Latin-American writers, through a French translation, in Paul Lacomblet's 1894 *Sept Essais* (Goic Cronología 1389; Morales 181 n.3).

literature and the arts, transcendentalism and the picturesque sought elevation and the vista, and the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic planes which that vista unlocked. In the oft-quoted passage from his 1836 “Nature,” Ralph Waldo Emerson described feeling “uplifted into infinite space,” which allowed him to see everything at once, and he described becoming a “transparent eyeball” (Emerson 10). Whitman himself would write in 1855, in what would later become “Song of Myself”: “My ties and ballasts leave me . . . I travel . . . I sail . . . [...] / I skirt sierras . . . my palms cover continents, / I am afoot with my vision (Untitled 36).

Emily Dickinson too, in her 1862 poem, “When we stand on the tops of Things,” posits that elevation reveals the otherwise hidden moral nature of the people below (Dickinson 154-55). Herman Melville, ever contrary, was even already parodying this elevated transcendentalist perspective in 1851 in *Moby Dick*. Sitting atop the mast-head, Ishmael fails to sight any whales and becomes “lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie . . . that at last he loses his identity . . .” (Melville 135). Satirizing Emerson, Ishmael warns of the danger that the overly-elevated soul “becomes diffused through time and space . . . forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over,” and imagines a senseless mystic tumbling headlong from the mast-head “through that transparent air into the summer sea . . .” (136). Melville’s critique of this nineteenth-century vision is prophetic, all the more so because Huidobro would levy a similar poetic criticism after having explored Whitman’s peculiar cosmic vision for himself.

Over three quarters of a century after Emerson’s “Nature,” the European avant-garde still carried residual traces of this nineteenth-century transcendentalist poetics, even before Huidobro repurposed Whitman so dramatically in *Ecuatorial*. Gloria Videla de

Rivero sees Whitman as a precursor to the cubist aesthetics of Huidobro's day; she convincingly argues that Huidobro, Apollinaire, and others were engaging in poetic cubism alongside their more visual artistic counterparts, by adopting in their poetry a spatially high, global-cosmopolitan vantage point ("El simultaneísmo"). From this elevated perspective, then, "the artistic gaze can contain situations that occur in distinct locations. . . . sequentiality disappears, and the past, present, and future can be known simultaneously" (567).<sup>32</sup> This simultaneity of sight for the "winged poet . . . of aerial vision" finds a precursor, Videla argues, in the cosmic vision of Walt Whitman, especially his "Salut au Monde" (573).<sup>33</sup> Citing Whitman's global catalogue of cities from section eight of "Salut au Monde," Videla de Rivero comments: "The lack, in mentioning the cities, of any order that corresponds to a logical itinerary implies this containing, simultaneist desire, that embraces in a single moment the most distinct and distant cities" (575).<sup>34</sup>

Whitman frequently used visual simultaneity to embrace the whole world at once, but he just as often turned his gaze on his own nation (indeed, in Whitman's verse the two terms are not always as distinct as they might be). On the one hand, Benedict Anderson (2006) astutely points out how linguistic and textual simultaneity—shared language and ritual texts—can themselves create the experience of national unity across time and space (144-45). On the other hand, the experience of simultaneity could also express the cosmopolitan desires of artists such as the cubists, the Spanish Ultraists, or

<sup>32</sup> "... la mirada artística puede abarcar situaciones que ocurren en lugares distintos. . . . desaparece la sucesión y pueden conocerse simultáneamente el pasado, el presente y el futuro."

<sup>33</sup> "... poeta alado . . . de visión aérea . . ."

<sup>34</sup> "La falta de un orden en la mención de las ciudades que responda a un itinerario lógico, insinúa ese deseo abarcador, simultaneista, que abraza a un tiempo las ciudades más distantes y más distintas."

even the Brazilian avant-garde writer Mário de Andrade, a contemporary (and reader) of Huidobro, who also saw Whitman's poetry as a precursor to this simultaneist aesthetic (Willis 167-68).

Whether nationalist or cosmopolitan, though, Whitman and the cubist poets employed a poetic vision that saw and incorporated everything in instant juxtaposition. Videla rightly perceives Whitman's all seeing poetic "I" as dimly present in the avant-garde, but her study misses Huidobro as a key importer of this Whitmanic aesthetic. Huidobro himself later described Whitman as the poet with the ability to see all things, and Videla's reference to Whitman's "Salut au Monde" is also significant not only because the poem perhaps best captures Whitman's transcendent global sight, but also because a close reading of Huidobro's revolutionary 1918 *Ecuatorial* uncovers striking textual and thematic parallels to Whitman's poem. As such, Huidobro's *Ecuatorial* emerges as a major point of entry for Whitman's vision into the Hispanophone avant-gardes, even as it nonetheless reveals that Huidobro was grappling with the problems of employing Whitman's gaze.

### **Rising with Whitman: *Ecuatorial* and "Salut au Monde"**

Huidobro wrote *Ecuatorial* in Paris during the First World War, a period that he later said marked him for life (Goic *Poesía* 36). First published in Madrid in 1918, the poem inaugurated the Spanish-language avant-garde, and I argue that the poem is modeled after—and is a clear revision of—Whitman's "Salut au Monde." While it is perhaps curious to see in Huidobro's fractured, war-torn avant-garde poem an appropriation of Whitman's exuberant, fraternal "Salut au Monde," a close reading

reveals striking similarities between the two poems, similarities that coalesce into a twentieth-century avant-garde take on Whitman's project of poetic seeing, as Huidobro uses Whitman's poetics of sight for his own purposes, even if *Ecuatorial* already shows the difficulties and dangers of placing this vision in the new context of postwar modernity.

Where or how Huidobro might have read "Salut au Monde" remains unknown, but it was most likely in the first book of Whitman's poetry in Spanish, by the Uruguayan poet Armando Vasseur.<sup>35</sup> In his 1912 *Walt Whitman: Poemas*, Vasseur selected, edited, and translated eighty-three of the *Leaves of Grass* poems. As Alegría has pointed out, and as Matt Cohen and Rachel Price further detail, Vasseur's translation has many divergences from Whitman's original texts, not only because of his heavy reliance on an earlier Italian translation to bolster his imperfect knowledge of English but also—as Santí reveals—because of Vasseur's heavy channeling of Nietzsche (Alegría "Whitman in Spain and Latin America" 349-75; Cohen and Price; Santí 163-164). Still, Vasseur's *Poemas* represents Whitman's first substantial textual entrance into the early-twentieth-century Hispanophone world, and the intriguing echoes, in *Ecuatorial*, of vocabulary from Vasseur's complete translation of "Salut au Monde" make it an illuminating backdrop to Huidobro's groundbreaking use of Whitman.

The similarities between *Ecuatorial* and "Salut au Monde" range from broad thematic parallels to moments of echoed diction. Both poems have an elevated speaker who can see all the earth simultaneously. Huidobro's speaker in *Ecuatorial*—the title refers to the equatorial line—holds a sky-high vigil over a globe broken by the First

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<sup>35</sup> Huidobro also mentions Vasseur in his 1914 essay "El Futurismo" ["Futurism"], in *Pasando y Pasando . . . [Passing and Passing . . .]* (163-71).

World War, as he begins “to sing over unbounded distances” while “the world dies” and “the cities of Europe / Are extinguished one by one” (*Ecuatorial* 491.2, 9, 17).<sup>36</sup> The speaker continues: “Seated above the parallel / We look upon our time” (*Ecuatorial* 492.37-38).<sup>37</sup> “Within me latitude widens,” Whitman’s “Salut au Monde” speaker says, “longitude lengthens . . . Banding the bulge of the earth winds the hot equator” (287). Here Vasseur’s translation of “Salut au Monde” turned Whitman’s noun “equator” into the adjectival “equatorial belt,” or “cinturón Ecuatorial,” making it a plausible source for the title of Huidobro’s poem (Vasseur 203). Both speakers have limitless vistas: from his vantage point, the speaker of *Ecuatorial* can see the South Pole, the Congo, Africa, Norway, Europe, Marseilles, California, Paris, Egypt, Niagara Falls, Latin America, Switzerland, and Rome—most of which also appear in Whitman’s exhaustive “Salut au Monde” geography.<sup>38</sup>

From their vantage points, both Whitman’s and Huidobro’s speakers can also see the ongoing exploration and travel of the globe. Whitman celebrates this exploration in a lengthy passage:

I behold the sail and steamships of the world, some in clusters in port,  
some on their voyages,  
Some double the cape of Storms, some cape Verde, others capes  
Guardafui, Bon, or Bajadore,  
Others Dondra head, others pass the straits of Sunda, others cape Lopatka,  
others Behring’s straits.... (“Salut au Monde” 290)

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<sup>36</sup> “a cantar sobre las lejanías desatadas,” “el mundo muere,” “Las ciudades de Europa / Se apagan una a una”; With the exception of his manifestos or the prose preface to *Altazor*, Huidobro does not typically use punctuation, so for brevity of citation I have refrained from ellipses when citing unpunctuated texts unless their absence would seriously misrepresent the sense. Because Whitman tends to punctuate his poems, I have indicated with ellipses where I have elided part of a complete sentence.

<sup>37</sup> “Sentados sobre el paralelo / Miremos nuestro tiempo”

<sup>38</sup> For reasons of brevity, (*Ecuatorial* 494.71b, 494.73, 494.74, 495.83, 495.85, 497.135, 498.162, 499.182, 501.245, 502.264, 502.274, 502.282, 503.292.)

“Others,” Whitman’s speaker continues, “sternly push their way through the northern winter packs, / Others descend or ascend the Obi or the Lena, / Others the Niger or the Congo. . .” (290). But although the expansionist Whitman celebrates those who “sternly push their way” into other lands, Huidobro’s speaker sees that same exploration in terms of the multiform violence of imperialism (Whitman “Salut” 290):

The bravest captains On an iceberg went to the Poles To leave his pipe in the lips Of Eskimos	Captain Cook Hunts the Northern Lights In the South Pole
Others stab fresh lances in the Congo The heart of sunny Africa Opens like pecked figs. (Huidobro <i>Ecuatorial</i> 494.69-75) <sup>39</sup>	

Here the cultural imperialism of the captains, leaving a European pipe in the mouth of the indigenous peoples, combines with the colonizing violence of those who “stab fresh lances” into the African heartland (494.69-72, 73).<sup>40</sup> Whitman’s now well-documented complicity in supporting US expansionism notwithstanding, his radical egalitarianism extends a sympathetic brotherhood to the African, in language similar to that which Huidobro would later use: Whitman’s speaker salutes “You dim-descended, black, divine-soul’d African, large, fine-headed, nobly-form’d, superbly destin’d, on equal terms with me!” (“Salut” 294). Likewise Huidobro’s speaker sees “black people / of race

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<sup>39</sup> The two columns of text here manifest a kind of textual cubism, and can be loosely read left to right as one broken stanza, or as two stanzas to be—in theory if not in actuality—read at once:

“Los más bravos capitanes En un ice-berg iban a los polos Para dejar su pipa en labios Esquimales	El capitán Cook Caza auroras boreales En el Polo Sur
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Otros clavan frescas lanzas en el Congo

El corazón del África soleado  
 Se abre como los higos picoteados”

<sup>40</sup> “clavan frescas lanzas”

divine / slaves in Europe" (*Ecuatorial* 494.73-77).<sup>41</sup> Both authors do acknowledge white exploitation of blacks. Whitman's speaker's perspective allows him to see the "slave-makers of the earth," and to hear "the wheeze of the slave-coffle as the slaves march on . . ." ("Salut" 288). But for Huidobro this African slavery stems causally from the incursion of explorers into Africa, since his imagery proceeds logically from Captain Cook, to the "fresh lances" stabbed into Africa, to the "[African] slaves in Europe," who later in the poem suffer further (more surrealist) violence (*Ecuatorial* 494.73, 78):

The black slave  
                          opens his mouth promptly  
For his pianist master  
Who plays on his teeth. (500.221-25)<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, the world of *Ecuatorial* has been overrun by rapacious explorations that conquer and exploit: the speaker laments that "Men with short wings / Have travelled it all," and carried home "the four Cardinal directions" as "the booty of war" (495.82-83, 88, 84).<sup>43</sup> Huidobro's diction here connects him to Vasseur's translation of "Salut au Monde," and to Whitman: Huidobro uses a form of the verb *recorrer*, for "travel," which Vasseur had himself used to translate "traverse" from Whitman's aforementioned ship section in "Salut au Monde" (Vasseur 205). The verb not only denotes travel and exploration, but can also connote an exhaustive, all-encompassing, and penetrating *gaze*. From Huidobro's later work, as shall be discussed below, we know that the Chilean poet considered this gaze to be integral to Whitman, perhaps in fact one of his defining poetic traits, and in *Ecuatorial* the distinction between the poetic gaze of the speaker who

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<sup>41</sup> "los negros / de divina raza / esclavos en Europa..."

<sup>42</sup> "El negro esclavo / abre la boca prestamente / Para el amo pianista / Que hace cantar sus dientes"

<sup>43</sup> "Hombres de alas cortas / Han recorrido todo" "Los cuatro puntos cardinales" "Como botín de guerra"

desires to see all, and the imperialistic gaze of the explorer, conqueror, and enslaver who desires to possess all, begins to blur.

Indeed, the world that Huidobro's speaker sees—even using Whitman's “Salut au Monde” eyes—is a radically harsher world from the one that Whitman's speaker sees and embraces. For Huidobro, the “Salut au Monde” way of seeing the earth only highlights a modern world undergoing fragmentation. Whitman's speaker does occasionally acknowledge evil, imperfection, and inhumanity on Earth, describing “the defective human bodies of the earth, / The blind, the deaf and dumb, idiots, hunchbacks, lunatics . . .,” but they are nonetheless incorporated and even welcomed within his embracing vision as he pulls the countless parts of the world together into himself and into his poem (“Salut” 290, 294). In contrast, Huidobro's poem is full of disembodied and divided parts, the surrealism of his verse pushing even his synecdoche into images of actually severed members, as heads, hands, and pupils are divorced from the bodily whole (*Ecuatorial* 491.10, 503.302, 496.115). Nature shows this splintering effect as well, as the land is strewn with “the wings of swallows” (492.33-34);<sup>44</sup> even the Equator is “chopped into pieces,” and the century is “cut in two” (491.13, 501.239).<sup>45</sup> Organic integrity of any sort seems impossible for the modern world of *Ecuatorial*, and although Whitman's speaker admiringly describes the “the electric telegraphs of the earth” as “the filaments of the news of the wars, deaths, losses, gains, passions of my race” the speaker of *Ecuatorial* sees instead

the captive cities  
Sewn together by telephonic lines  
And the words and deeds

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<sup>44</sup> “alas de golondrinas”

<sup>45</sup> “trizada a trechos” “cortado en dos”

Fly through the telegraph. (Whitman “Salut” 290; Huidobro *Ecuatorial* 495.96-100)<sup>46</sup>

In Huidobro’s poem, the fragments of nation and world are literally *stitched* together, to prevent them, as it were, from flying apart.

Disillusionment and isolation grow, as Huidobro’s speaker sees more of the world. Whereas Whitman’s speaker can ask eagerly “What do you see Walt Whitman?,” the speaker in *Ecuatorial* can only cry out, “QUÉ DE COSAS HE VISTO,” a line whose ambiguity renders it either a desperate “WHAT ABOUT THE THINGS I’VE SEEN?” or an ironic “SO WHAT OF THE THINGS I’VE SEEN?” (Whitman “Salut” 289; Huidobro *Ecuatorial* 498.169). Whitman’s encompassing gaze brings him fraternity and love with all men: toward the end of “Salut au Monde,” his speaker says, “My spirit has pass’d in compassion and determination around the whole earth, / I have look’d for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands . . .” (296). In contrast, the speaker of *Ecuatorial* laments, toward the end of the poem:

Love

In few places I have found it. (502.275-77)<sup>47</sup>

Love

Whitman’s poem ends with the salute to all humanity, saying, “I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal . . .,” but Huidobro converts it into a surrealist welcome to the very airplane that brings about the apocalypse (Whitman “Salut” 297):

Toward the lone airplane

<sup>46</sup> “ . . . las ciudades cautivas  
Cosidas una a una por hilos telefónicos

Y las palabras y los gestos  
Vuelan en torno del telégrafo”

<sup>47</sup> “El Amor / El Amor / En pocos sitios lo he encontrado...” Even the distance between the words on the page emphasizes the scarcity of human love in the vastness.

That will sing one day in the blue  
 A flock of hands  
 Will rise up from the years. (Huidobro *Ecuatorial* 504.314-17)<sup>48</sup>

And here, evocative of Whitman's "signal" of solidarity at the end of "Salut au Monde," this apocalyptic airplane (bomber?) is the "SUPREME SIGN" that signifies "The End of the Universe," albeit an end not totally exclusive of possible future rebirth (Whitman "Salut" 297; Huidobro *Ecuatorial* 504.319, 323).<sup>49</sup>

So, even as Huidobro re-casts Whitman's "Salut au Monde" into the fractured, postwar *Ecuatorial*, his poetry already expresses some of the risks and tensions inherent in the Whitmanic gaze. Huidobro dramatizes two serious dangers of seeing the world this way. First, the poetic subject who sees all things at once might come to desire to possess all things by colonizing, enslaving, and absorbing all the "others" into an imperial self as the explorers do in *Ecuatorial*. Second, Whitman's catalogues—full of countless people, places, and things seen—pose a unique aesthetic threat to Huidobro's notion of the Creationist poet, for the inpouring of so much of the world into the poet's consciousness threatens his ability to truly create from within. It is this conflict that finds expression in *Altazor* (1931), and although Huidobro initially repurposed Whitman's vision for *Ecuatorial*, now he would ultimately dramatize his belief in the impossibility of sustaining both Whitman's all-embracing gaze and his own creative poetic integrity. The poet-protagonist of *Altazor* must empty himself, stripping away the perceived external realities in order to return to the internal reality that is the source of poetry within himself. Only then can he create anew.

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<sup>48</sup> "Hacia el solo aeroplano / Que cantará un día en el azul / Se alzará de los años / Una bandada de manos..."

<sup>49</sup> "SUPREMO SIGNO" "El Fin del Universo"

### “Walt, You Contain Enough . . .”:

#### The (Dis)Integrated Whitman

The speaker in “Salut au Monde” could comfortably see every place and person in the world at once, yet Whitman had himself questioned in his poetry whether this kind of poetic vision was sustainable. In “Song of Myself,” his speaker describes being accosted by the demands of the people, events, facts, and sights that inundate him, describing how “[t]rippers and askers surround me . . .” (191). To survive, the speaker must maintain some distance: “Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am . . .” (191). Here the words “pulling and hauling” capture not just the jostle of the crowded universe he sees, but literally the centrifugal pulling force exerted on the speaker as he experiences the sheer volume of perceptions (191). His speaker insists that he can gaze upon all things while still remaining himself: “I know I am solid and sound, / To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow . . .” (206). “My foothold is tenon’d and mortis’d in granite,” he boasts, “I laugh at what you call dissolution” (207).

Braggadocio aside, Whitman’s speaker does sense the uneasy balance between the centrifugal and centripetal pull of his embracing gaze;<sup>50</sup> although with the sea he is “partaker of influx and efflux,” he admits that “dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me . . .” (209, 213). Likewise he has moments of doubt as to the prudence of seeing and absorbing all things: his own speech mocks him, saying, “*Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?*” (213, emphasis in original). What makes this containment possible, this

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<sup>50</sup> Doris Sommer reads some of these tensions as reflecting Whitman’s political philosophy, an “. . . unstable but compelling solution to liberal democracy’s fundamental contradiction between demands for (liberal) personal *freedom* and the requirements of public (democratic) *equality*” (“Freely and Equally Yours” 36).

seeing and identifying with all things, is the radical empathy of Whitman's speaker with the universe. Yet the tenuous balance comes at a cost. After reliving in graphic detail the massacre of the Texans at Goliad, the battle of the *Bonhomme Richard* and the British *Serapis*, and other vivid acts of historical violence or disease, the speaker of "Song of Myself" becomes overwhelmed by the suffering he sees and experiences: he cries, "Enough! enough! enough! / Somehow I have been stunn'd. Stand back!" (230). Whitman's speaker admits to being "on the verge of a usual mistake" (231). As R.W. French insightfully notes, Whitman's speaker has at this moment in the poem overindulged the "sympathetic imagination," which is to "identify too completely with the lives of others and thereby lose not only the aesthetic detachment necessary for artistic creation, but also, in a larger sense, to abandon one's identity" (19). Fighting to preserve his creative integrity as well as his identity, Whitman's speaker struggles to distance himself momentarily from his vision:

That I could forget the mockers and insults!  
 That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the bludgeons and hammers!  
 That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning. ("Song of Myself" 231)

But after this momentary struggle, Whitman's speaker resumes the poetic control of his earlier self, now able to "look with a separate look" on suffering, and to continue to sustain this tension (231): "I remember now, I resume the overstaid fraction . . ." (231). Indeed, "fraction," with its connotation of breakage and fragmentation, is appropriate here, because for Huidobro the attempt to see and contain the suffering and heterogeneity of the world means the disintegration of the artist.

There is a sense in which Huidobro's *Altazor* might be read as a *vanguardista*

take on “Song of Myself,” where the speaker describes himself in detail, sees and enters into the lives and sufferings of others, shouts nonsense (“barbaric yawp”), and catalogues the things of the earth and of the cosmos. But if the eponymous protagonist Altazor sings, it is the swansong of Whitman’s unifying vision; he cannot “laugh,” as Whitman’s speaker had, “at what you call dissolution,” perched as he is above the wreckage of the modern world (Whitman “Salut” 207). Altazor must exorcise the chaotic world from his soul, and create a new reality, original and pure. This renunciation of Whitman’s all-seeing “Salut au Monde” vision responds not only to the horrors of the modern world, but also specifically to the way Whitman’s sight itself threatens the Chilean writer’s avant-garde aesthetic philosophy, *Creacionismo*, which rejected mimeticism and sought to create new realities independent of the world.

### **Turning Away From Whitman’s World:**

#### **Creationism and Anti-Mimesis**

Whitman’s unwinking gaze upon the world runs starkly counter to Huidobro’s Creationist notions of art. To Whitman, poetry itself meant the act of interpreting the hidden meaning behind everything in the world, since “All are written to me, and I must get at what the writing means” (“Song of Myself” 206); but to Huidobro, the poet does not interpret reality, but makes it. As early as 1914, Huidobro had declared war on representing reality in his anti-mimetic manifesto “Non Serviam,” read to the Athenaeum of Santiago in Chile: “Until now,” he wrote, “we have done nothing but imitate the world in its appearances, we have not created anything . . . ?” (1294.15-18).<sup>51</sup> “We have accepted,” he continues, “without greater reflection, the fact that there cannot be realities

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<sup>51</sup> “Hasta ahora no hemos hecho otra cosa que imitar el mundo en sus aspectos, no hemos creado nada.”

other than those that surround us, and we have not thought that we too can create realities in a world of our own, in a world that awaits its own fauna and flora” (1294.22-25).<sup>52</sup> In his 1923 manifesto “Creacionismo” [“Creationism”] he further argued that the created work of art “[d]oes not have anything similar to it in the external world, it makes real what does not exist, which is to say, it makes itself reality” (1339.56-57).<sup>53</sup>

This insistence on an anti-mimetic turn was not, perhaps, entirely novel; however, it was seen by some influential thinkers to be a fundamental premise of the avant-gardes. In his 1925 “La deshumanización del arte” [“The Dehumanization of Art”], Spanish philosopher and critic José Ortega y Gasset had defended a perceived lack of mimetic aptitude in the avant-gardes by arguing that its artists sought to escape representations of the real, natural realities that he termed “human” (“humano”), and that therefore, to reject external reality was to “dehumanize it” (“deshumanizarla”) (27). Although Ortega y Gasset was correct in seeing that many in the artistic vanguard were indeed greatly antagonistic to so-called mimetic art, Vicky Unruh persuasively demonstrates, the Hispanophone avant-garde movements were in fact more committed to engaging the “human” in their art than Ortega y Gasset may have thought, and the Spaniard’s article sparked among the artists of the avant-gardes a strong reaffirmation to the contrary, insisting that they were committed instead to the “‘rehumanization’ of art” (*Contentious* 21). Although Huidobro’s *Creacionismo* certainly fits Ortega y Gasset’s description, the source of the disagreement may be the Spanish critic’s choice of terms. Huidobro’s

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<sup>52</sup> “Hemos aceptado, sin mayor reflexión, el hecho de que no puede haber otras realidades que las que nos rodean, y no hemos pensado que nosotros también podemos crear realidades en un mundo nuestro, en un mundo que espera su fauna y su flora propias.”

<sup>53</sup> “No tiene nada semejante a él en el mundo externo, hace real lo que no existe, es decir, se hace él mismo realidad.”

rejection of nature and the things of the “real” world as improper subjects for Creationist poetry is clear, but for him the human subject must remain the center and creator of new realities, and as such, the true path of the poet must not be the more abstract dehumanization Ortega y Gasset proposes, but rather a kind of magical, originary creation from within the human self. Thus, these ideas, expressed in Huidobro’s manifestos represent the aesthetic underpinnings of *Altazor*, as its protagonist Altazor turns a blind eye to the world, empties himself of Whitman’s embracing vision, and delves inward to create something truly new.

### **Falling from Whitman: Altazor’s Self-Emptying**

While Huidobro had not named him explicitly in *Ecuatorial*, we know Whitman was on his mind around the time of *Ecuatorial*’s composition and publication.<sup>54</sup> Although it would not be published in full until thirteen years later, Huidobro stated that he wrote the preface to *Altazor* in 1918, the very same year as *Ecuatorial* was published, and he described this preface as “springing from the publication of *Ecuatorial* . . .” (qtd. Goic “Introducción” 726).<sup>55</sup> It is here in *Altazor*’s preface, written on the heels of *Ecuatorial*, that Huidobro names Whitman only to disavow him. Altazor, the poet-hero, describes himself as “The one who has *seen everything*, who knows all secrets without being Walt Whitman, for I have never had a beard as white as beautiful nurses and frozen streams” (*Altazor* 734.100-3, emphasis mine).<sup>56</sup> Altazor begins the poem seeing like Whitman, but

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<sup>54</sup> The experimental book-length poem *Altazor* has a complex textual history: Huidobro wrote it in French and Spanish, revised it over several years, and only published the poem in its final form in 1931.

<sup>55</sup> “. . . a raíz de la publicación de *Ecuatorial* . . .”

<sup>56</sup> “Aquél que todo lo ha visto, que conoce todos los secretos sin ser Walt Whitman, pues jamás he tenido una barba blanca como las bellas enfermeras y los arroyos helados.”

for Huidobro's ethical and aesthetic reasons, he must not *be* Whitman.

From the beginning of the book, Altazor, whose portmanteau name means "High-Hawk," meteorically falls from his elevated perspective. In the prose Preface, Altazor describes himself at the high point, before his descent: "One afternoon, I took my parachute and said: 'Between a star and two swallows.' This is Death, that rushes toward me like the earth toward a falling balloon" (731.10-11).<sup>57</sup> His "parachute began to fall vertiginously," and as he descends, Altazor has moments where he relives the "Salut au Monde" / *Ecuatorial* vision (732.42):<sup>58</sup> "I can see mountains, rivers, forests, the sea, boats, flowers, and snails. / I see the night and the day and the point where they meet . . ." and where he says, "I see all things. . ." (733.89-90, 97).<sup>59</sup> Rather than elating him, however, this vision oppresses and crushes him with the sight of everything; he cries that he is "burdened with words with nations with cities / Crowds howls" (743.248-49).<sup>60</sup>

Like Whitman's speaker in "Song of Myself," Altazor feels the disintegrating pull from the suffering world. Huidobro himself had witnessed the so-called Great War, which Altazor describes in terms of the self-alienation occurring in shock: ". . . I sit on the edge of my eyes to witness the entrance of the images . . ." (738.88-89).<sup>61</sup> He insists, "It is I Altazor, / Altazor," as if to preserve his identity from the horror of war he is about

<sup>57</sup> "Una tarde, cogí mi paracaídas y dije: 'Entre una estrella y dos golondrinas.' He aquí la muerte que se acerca como la tierra al globo que cae."

<sup>58</sup> ". . . paracaídas comenzó a caer vertiginosamente."

<sup>59</sup> "Veo las montañas, los ríos, las selvas, el mar, los barcos, las flores y los caracoles. / Veo la noche y el día y el eje en que se juntan . . ." "Lo veo todo. . ."

<sup>60</sup> ". . . cargado de mundos de países de ciudades / Muchedumbres aullidos . . ."

<sup>61</sup> "En tanto me siento al borde de mis ojos / Para asistir a la entrada de las imágenes"

to depict (739.90-91).<sup>62</sup> Then the war: he states that he “opened his eyes” on this violent age (739.99).<sup>63</sup>

Only six months ago  
 I left the freshly-cut equator  
 In the warlike tomb of the patient slave  
 A pious crown over the human stupidity  
 It is I that am speaking in this year of 1919  
 It is winter  
 And Europe buried all of its dead  
 And a thousand tears compose a lonely cross of snow. (739.117-24)<sup>64</sup>

The horrors of the First World War have made him fall “from the heights of his star” (740.133):<sup>65</sup>

To go on  
 No      It is enough  
 To go on burdened with worlds with nations with cities  
 Crowds howls. (743.246-49)<sup>66</sup>

Whereas Whitman’s gaze sought poetic communion with the peoples of the world, Altazor needs solitude to create, to escape the overwhelming sensation of all the things and sufferings and events and places. He asks: “Give me give me quickly a plain of silence / A plain unpopulated like the eyes of the dead” (752.553-54):<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> “Soy yo Altazor / Altazor”

<sup>63</sup> “Abrí los ojos”

<sup>64</sup> “Hace seis meses solamente  
 Dejé la ecuatorial recién cortada  
 En la tumba guerrera del esclavo paciente  
 Corona de piedad sobre la estupidez humana  
 Soy yo que estoy hablando en este año de 1919  
 Es el invierno  
 Ya la Europa enterró todos sus muertos  
 Y un millar de lágrimas hacen una sola cruz de nieve”

<sup>65</sup> “de las Alturas de estrella”

<sup>66</sup> “Basta ya / Seguir cargado de mundos de países de ciudades / Muchedumbres aullidos”

<sup>67</sup> “Dadme dadme pronto un llano de silencio / Un llano despoblado como los ojos de los muertos”

Robinson why did you return from your island?  
 From the island of your private works and dreams  
 The island of yourself rich with your acts  
 [...]  
 Without the control of the intruding eye  
 Or the strange hand to break the spell. (753.555-60)<sup>68</sup>

Like Robinson Crusoe, he must isolate himself from the world, using a kind of sensory deprivation to “[b]reak all links to the veins” as well as “the chains / Of the eyes paths of the horizons” (764.882, 883-884).<sup>69</sup>

The need for a blank slate requires the destruction of all things, even language itself. In an experimental 192-line litany in Canto V, Huidobro turns the phrase “molino de viento” (windmill) into a mill to grind up anything and everything:

Windmill  
 Mill of breath  
 Mill of story  
 Mill of attempt  
 Mill of increase  
 Mill of ointment  
 Mill of food  
 Mill of torment  
 Mill of rescue  
 Mill of coming. (789.1632-42)<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> “Robinsón por qué volviste de tu isla?  
 De la isla de tus obras y tus sueños privados  
 La isla de ti mismo rica de tus actos  
 [...]  
 Sin control de ojo intruso  
 Ni mano extraña que rompa los encantos”

<sup>69</sup> “Romper las ligaduras de las venas” “las cadenas / De los ojos senderos de horizontes”

<sup>70</sup> “Molino de viento  
 Molino de aliento  
 Molino de cuento  
 Molino de intento  
 Molino de aumento  
 Molino de ungüento  
 Molino de sustento  
 Molino de tormento  
 Molino de salvamento  
 Molino de advenimiento”

In grinding up the things of the world, Huidobro's mill breaks off the signifier from the signified, only to further deconstruct the signifier, as the morphemes separate and recombine into playfully suggestive but opaque neologisms:

The carabantanina  
 The carabantantoo  
 The farandosilina  
 The Farandoo  
 The Carabantantah  
 The Carabantantee. (796.1875-80)<sup>71</sup>

The last two Cantos, then, proceed with the deconstruction of existing linguistic meaning, as syntax and semantics break down; finally, Altazor incants a non-signifying poetry of pure sound—pure song—culminating in the final, untranslatable vocalized lines of the poem:

Lalalí  
 Io ia  
 (i i i o)  
 Ai a i ai a i i i o ia. (808.2268-71)

Altazor has created a new, adamic language, chanting into being a new poetic world to replace the old world of which, through Whitman's all-embracing eyes, he saw far too much.

### **Conclusion: Hemispheric Visions**

What happens when a Chilean poet transplants Whitman's “Salut au Monde” global vision and embracing hemispheric gaze into Europe and South America in the new, cosmopolitan environment of the avant-garde? Huidobro had dramatized in his

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<sup>71</sup> “La carabantanina  
 La carabantantú  
 La farandosilina  
 La Farandú  
 La Carabantá  
 La Carabantí”

poems how Whitman's all-encompassing vision might become rather a takeover of both world and poetry: in *Ecuatorial*, imperialist explorers conquer the earth, and in *Altazor*, the words and things and places of the world threaten to colonize his poetry, making it difficult or impossible for the Creationist poet to make his own pure art. But these political and aesthetic concerns led Huidobro to reject Whitman's global vision in the 1930s, and by the 1940s the Chilean poet would also go on to qualify the notion Whitman had of a hemispheric "America." Late in his career, Huidobro's discomfort with a Whitmanian vision of the world surfaced again, as he critiqued US pretensions to dominance of the "American" hemisphere.

In 1941, Huidobro published three open letters to the US, touching on inter-American cultural and political tensions, and urging the US to enter the Second World War. His first "Letter to Uncle Sam" ["Carta al tío Sam"], chides the US for lording its prosperity over the hemisphere and laments the mutual cultural misunderstandings between the Americas (362, 363-64). His "Second Letter To Uncle Sam" ["Segunda carta al tío Sam"] promises Latin America's support if the US joins the war, but with a qualification that critiques US pretensions to hemispheric dominance: "I insist on this, esteemed uncle, so that you know that our collaboration is not unconditional, but rather that it hinges on the fact of whether you are right or wrong. Not on the pressures that your family can exert on ours" (366).<sup>72</sup>

Huidobro's joy at the August 1941 "Atlantic Charter"—in some sense the prelude to the US entrance into the war—and of the nation's official entrance into the war several months later, did not entirely make him forget the hemispheric "pressures" he had

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<sup>72</sup> "Insisto en esto, estimado tío, para que sepas que nuestra colaboración no es incondicional, sino que está originada por el hecho de que tú tengas o no tengas razón. No por las presiones que pueda ejercer tu familia sobre la nuestra."

critiqued in his “Second Letter”: his poem on the latter occasion, “Canto a los soldados americanos” [“Song to the American Soldiers”] which constitutes his final poetic engagement with Whitman, undermines any US-hemispheric pretensions. “There go the heroic young men,” the speaker says, “With their smile open to the heavens and the earth and the sea / There go the soldiers of your America Walt Whitman” (Huidobro “Canto a los soldados americanos” 1227.14-16).<sup>73</sup> Here it is not the incorporative gaze but rather the loving smile upon all things that beams from Whitman’s young men. *Ecuatorial*’s explorer-conquers had carried home “the four Cardinal directions” as “the booty of war,” but in this poem Huidobro makes the US soldiers bring their hemisphere as a gift to others, going “to the great sacrifice” (*Ecuatorial* 495.88,84; “Canto a los soldados” 1227.17):<sup>74</sup> he exclaims, “There go the Atlases of the New World / With a hemisphere on their shoulders” (1227.3-4).<sup>75</sup> Huidobro carefully labels the US as “your America,” and praises “America sister America,” thwarting any attempt to make the US (or perhaps Whitman) father to any of the rest of the Americas (1227.16, 1228.48).<sup>76</sup> The US and the Americas may be kin, Huidobro is saying, but they are equals.

Huidobro’s fascinating “Third Letter to Uncle Sam” [“Tercera carta al tío sam”], written after he learned of the Atlantic Charter, also lauds the US’s decision; but here Huidobro makes a curious move, shifting his Creationist aesthetics into the geopolitical realm, so that poetic creation and post-war reconstruction coalesce into a utopian vision of the global future. For Huidobro the generosity of the Charter is matched by the

<sup>73</sup> “Ahí van los heroicos muchachos / Con su sonrisa abierta al cielo a la tierra y al mar / Ahí van los soldados de tu América Walt Whitman”

<sup>74</sup> “Los cuatro puntos cardinales...” “Como botín de guerra...” “al gran sacrificio...”

<sup>75</sup> “Ahí van los atlantes del Nuevo Mundo / Con un hemisferio a cuestas”

<sup>76</sup> “tu América” “América hermana América”

symbolism of the sea, which represents “the international sense of man. . . . Generosity, absolute breadth . . .” (“Tercera carta” 367).<sup>77</sup> He writes that “we hope, dear uncle, that after the victory a really inhabitable world will be built, a world of collaboration, effective, virile, fit for a true rebirth . . .” (368).<sup>78</sup> “Today it is urgent to fight . . .” Huidobro writes, but “. . . tomorrow it will be necessary to create” (369).<sup>79</sup> Even his poem, like his third letter, celebrates the future results of the war in Creationist terms: the US soldiers are “young gods,” just as he once wrote that “[t]he Poet is a little god” (“Canto a los soldados” 1228.40; “Arte poética” 391.18);<sup>80</sup> and like a Creationist poetic utterance, the liberty they bring is “[t]he magic word,” that is “[d]eeper than all the poems” (“Canto a los soldados” 1227.21, 23).<sup>81</sup>

In a sense, we might see Huidobro retaining something of Whitman’s embracing vision here, but at a safe distance. As Doris Sommer points out, Whitman’s democratic vision, “where all are equal because all are identical, is politically precarious, poised between the freedom to embrace comrades and the imperialist thrust that takes everything in” (“Freely and Equally Yours” 57). Huidobro may wish to preserve a kind of utopian vision of the future, but he does not necessarily want to be absorbed into Whitman or into the US. As Brian T. Edwards might describe it, then, Huidobro’s important poetic use of Whitman reveals “something carried forward, more left behind” (234). Although perhaps willing to work with Whitman’s “America” to create this new world, Huidobro wanted to

<sup>77</sup> “representa el sentido internacional del hombre . . . . La generosidad, la amplitud absoluta . . .”

<sup>78</sup> “esperamos, querido tío, que después de la victoria se construya un mundo realmente habitable, un mundo de colaboración, eficaz, viril, apto para un verdadero renacimiento . . .”

<sup>79</sup> “Hoy es preciso luchar . . .” “. . . mañana será necesario crear.”

<sup>80</sup> “jóvenes dioses” “El Poeta es un pequeño Dios.”

<sup>81</sup> “La mágica palabra” “Más honda que todos los poemas”

do so “without being Walt Whitman.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### “NICARAGUAN WORDS”: CORONEL’S *VANGUARDIA* AND THE POLITICS OF WHITMAN’S LANGUAGE

“My oldest memory in which the United States appear,” writes the Nicaraguan author and diplomat José Coronel Urtecho in a 1962 memoir, “is mixed with the distant and almost mythological memory I have of my father . . . when I was at most four years old” (“Americanismo” 25).<sup>82</sup> He goes on to describe his father’s explosive anger when the child José wore a new sailor outfit embroidered with intertwined US and Nicaraguan flags (25):

I can still see my father—tall, frenetic, pale,—brandishing menacingly a pair of enormous scissors in his right hand, with his left hand grabbing me by the offensive part of the little sailor shirt and cutting off...just the little patch of cloth on which the US flag was embroidered, and all amidst my cries of terror at an unwonted aggression which took me years to comprehend, and which I have never forgotten. (25)<sup>83</sup>

In this traumatic encounter, the child Coronel had experienced for the first time the violent passions aroused by the “unwonted aggression” of US occupation in Nicaragua’s long struggle for cultural and national autonomy.

But this violent episode of scissor-wielding anti-imperialism contrasts greatly with the strongly pro-US environment in which José Coronel was raised, in the house of his US-educated maternal grandfather, where he and his mother moved after his father’s suicide in 1910 (Rodríguez Núñez 197; Coronel “Americanismo” 25). Coronel contrasts

<sup>82</sup> “El más antiguo de mis recuerdos en que figuran los Estados Unidos, se confunde con el lejano y casi mitológico que guardo de mi padre . . . cuando tendría yo a lo más cuatro años.”

<sup>83</sup> Veo a mi padre todavía—alto, frenético, demudado—blandiendo, amenazante, en la mano derecha unas tijeras descomunales, cogiéndome con la izquierda por la parte ofensiva de la blusita marinera y recortando . . . exactamente el trocito de tela en que estaba bordada la banderita norteamericana, y todo aquello entre mis gritos de terror ante la insólita agresión que sólo he comprendido con los años y que nunca he olvidado.”

his father's house to this house, where “there existed on the contrary, a climate of admiration and even a cult of all things ‘american’ ...” (“Americanismo” 25).<sup>84</sup> At this time, and throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, a deep contradiction lay at the heart of Nicaraguan culture: on the one hand, many prominent Nicaraguans vehemently condemned the repeated military, cultural, and economic encroachments that the US had made in Nicaragua since the 1840s; on the other hand, many of those same individuals were highly “Americanized” elites, speaking English and driving US-made automobiles, most especially the Granada-based Conservatives of which Coronel was one (Gobat 200). As Coronel wrote: “My personal attitude towards the United States was for many years ambivalent: I found myself attracted, I would almost say fascinated, and at the same time repelled by them” (“Americanismo” 26).<sup>85</sup> Even after a lifetime of studying US literature, he continued, “in reality I am not sure if I have overcome that ambivalence” (26).<sup>86</sup>

This fascinated but ambivalent relation to the US informed much of Coronel’s life’s work, and what began for him as an avid personal curiosity about the US, its literature, and its culture would ultimately have far-reaching cultural and national effects on Nicaragua well into the 1970s. For, from 1924 to 1927, while most of his peers went to Europe, the young Coronel chose to live and study in San Francisco, and, when he returned, he founded an avant-garde movement that vocally denounced US intervention and sought to radically redefine Nicaraguan literature and politics. Yet his “Nicaraguan

<sup>84</sup> “...existía por el contrario, un ambiente de admiración y hasta de culto a todo lo ‘americano’ ...”

<sup>85</sup> “Mi actitud personal hacia los Estados Unidos fue mucho años ambivalente: me encontraba atraído, casi diría fascinado, y al mismo tiempo repelido por ellos.”

<sup>86</sup> “...en realidad no sé si he superado aquella ambivalencia.”

Anti-Academy,” later simply dubbed the *Vanguardia*, for all its vociferous anti-US attitudes and its strong aesthetics of Nicaraguan nationalism, remained strongly (and paradoxically) permeated by the literary culture of its professed enemy, since Coronel also brought with him from California a wide reading in nineteenth- and twentieth-century US poetry, which he immediately began translating and injecting into his newly-founded avant-garde.<sup>87</sup>

And of these US authors, it is Walt Whitman who seems to have fascinated Coronel the most, for the Nicaraguan would return to him again and again throughout his career, grappling with Whitman’s project, anthologizing and translating him, analyzing his poetry and prose, and probing the US author’s formidable body of ideas about literature, language, politics, and nation. This chapter seeks to understand Whitman’s circulation in the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* and its later incarnations, and argues that Coronel appropriated Whitman’s poetic nationalism as part of his own literary and political movement; more specifically, it argues that Coronel and the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* used Whitman in their avant-garde poetic project of a return to the vernacular, indigenous languages—a project deeply rooted in the *Vanguardia*’s positioning of itself against the growing cultural, military, and economic encroachment of the US into Nicaragua.

Although Coronel claimed in a memoir, “I can almost say that I learned to read English reading Poe and Whitman,” and although Whitman arguably stands out as the single US author about whom Coronel wrote most extensively, few scholars seem to have

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<sup>87</sup> In 1931, the already-formed movement published their first manifesto titled “Primer manifiesto: ligera exposición y proclama de la Anti-Academia nicaraguense” [“First Manifesto: a Light Exposition and Proclamation of the Nicaraguan Anti-Academy”]. In it, they call for an authentic Nicaraguan literature and art, and announcing “the literary vanguardia that we are forming” (“la vanguardia literaria que formamos”) (Mongalo et al 241).

taken Coronel's Whitman seriously as an active player in the formation, development, and maturation of the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* ("Nueva poesía americana" 51).<sup>88</sup> Jorge Eduardo Arellano, in his early critical monograph, *El Movimiento de Vanguardia de Nicaragua, 1927-1931, Gérmenes, Desarrollo, Significado, [The Vanguardia Movement of Nicaragua, 1927-1931, Origins, Development, Significance]* saw Whitman as merely the influential backdrop to the poets of the so-called "New American poetry"—writers such as Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg—who were so prized by Coronel and the *Vanguardia* (*Movimiento* 62). Antonio Melis's 1982 article, "Whitman Nella Poesia Nicarguense del '900: (Il Paradigma Civile E Il Paradigma Stilistico)" ["Whitman in Twentieth Century Nicaraguan Poetry: (The Civil Paradigm and the Stylistic Paradigm)"] offers perhaps the most sophisticated investigation to date of Whitman's role in Nicaraguan literature from Rubén Darío through Ernesto Cardenal. In it, Melis argues that Coronel appreciated "...the Whitmanian return of material reality in all its spontaneity," and that he clearly absorbed the Whitmanian style of enumeration (125, 129).<sup>89</sup> The article points out Coronel's understanding of the links between Whitman's poetry and Emerson's thought, especially in Whitman's search for "[t]he new language and the new rhythm"; however, Melis laments later on that "[i]t is not possible on this occasion to analyze the penetration and re-creation of the Whitmanian language in Coronel Urtecho" (125, 128).<sup>90</sup> Finally Melis's article, while it successfully signals Nicaragua as an important site of Whitman's transnational circulation, entirely lacks

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<sup>88</sup> "Casi puedo decir que aprendí a leer inglés leyendo a Poe y Whitman." Ezra Pound also figures prominently in Coronel's work.

<sup>89</sup> "...la restituzione whitmaniana della materia vitale nella sua spontaneità."

<sup>90</sup> "[i]l nuovo linguaggio e il nuovo ritmo..." "Non è possibile in questa occasione analizzare la penetrazione e la ricreazione del linguaggio whitmaniano in Coronel Urtecho."

historicization, and offers little insight into how—or more importantly, why—Coronel might have used Whitman in his nationalist *Vanguardia* movement.

Steven White's 1986 *Modern Nicaraguan Poetry: Dialogues with France and the United States* more successfully traces the appropriation of US literature by the movement, showing how the *Vanguardia*'s method of translation and interpretation reveals the nationalist, ethical, and aesthetic agenda at work in authors like Coronel, Joaquín Pasos, Ernesto Cardenal and others. White notes that "Coronel assimilates Whitman's Adamic realism," as well as—in his later poetry—his "enumerative style" (146, 156); yet White's treatment downplays Coronel's complex critical writings on, and translations of, Whitman, as well as his wide reading of the US poet's large body of work. As such, White's otherwise excellent book still risks presenting Coronel and the *Vanguardia* as seriously engaged only with twentieth-century US literary culture and thought, when in fact Coronel's extensive and deep engagement with Whitman reveals his project of reading and appropriating the "American Bard" that would ultimately shape his avant-garde movement's artistic experiment. More recently, Pedro Xavier Solis's 2001 *El Movimiento de Vanguardia de Nicaragua [The Nicaraguan Vanguardia Movement]* acknowledges Whitman's importance for Coronel Urtecho's "formation as a poet" but says nothing about Whitman's specific significance or role (29).

In sum, the current critical narrative surrounding the Nicaraguan avant-garde's appropriation of Whitman fails to substantively engage the complex ways that Coronel and the *Vanguardia* used Whitman in their project; as such, at stake here is not only our vision of hemispheric literary history, but more importantly our understanding of the real overlap between aesthetics and politics in twentieth-century US / Nicaraguan relations.

Instead, we can see the profound cultural impact of Coronel's employment of Whitman's "language experiments" as he forged a nationalist, autochthonous literature that sought at the same time to be aesthetically and politically new. The texts of this movement, and the politics of its members, would shape the course of Nicaraguan literature and history.

### **Fraught Relations: Nicaragua and the US**

US and Nicaraguan histories have been inextricably linked since the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>91</sup> After Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821, and its national sovereignty in 1838, it would in part, like many Latin American nations, look to the US as a model for modern, independent, "New World" nationhood. When the California Gold Rush began in 1848, US traffic across Nicaragua's short inter-oceanic route increased rapidly, bringing with it an influx of US investment and culture. After the Gold Rush faded, Nicaragua's León-based Liberal faction invited the Southern US filibuster William Walker in 1854 not only to help them win their civil war against the Granada-based Conservatives, but also, as Michele Gobat explains, to colonize Nicaragua with US settlers, in the belief that further "Americanization" in Nicaragua would bring with it both modernization and prosperity (27). Walker, whose ultimate goal was to create additional US slave-holding states in Central America, soon defeated the Conservatives, destroyed Granada, and seized control of Nicaragua (installing himself as president), only to be expelled by a coalition of Central American forces in 1857.<sup>92</sup>

The violence and upheaval of the Walker era inspired strong anti-US feelings among both Liberals and Conservatives, but Gobat persuasively shows how the menace

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<sup>91</sup> For the following summary of US-Nicaraguan relations, I rely heavily on Michele Gobat's 2005 book, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under US Imperial Rule*.

<sup>92</sup> When he returned to the region for a second attempt at conquest, Walker was executed by Honduran authorities in 1860.

of US power “paradoxically strengthened elite Nicaraguans’ infatuation with the US road to modernity,” since they felt that imitating the US would strengthen them against outside further foreign intervention (5, 50). After recovering from the Walker takeover, Liberals and Conservatives joined forces to govern Nicaragua jointly, but when the US crushed Nicaragua’s dream of an inter-oceanic canal by choosing Panama for its route in 1902, this disappointment, coupled with US military intervention from 1909-1912 in response to Nicaragua’s political instability, as Gobat describes it, “severely tested elites’ trust in Americanization” (48-49, 68, 71). President Taft further strained US-Nicaraguan relations when he followed up military intervention with so-called “Dollar Diplomacy,” which lasted until 1912, and by which US bank representatives managed Nicaraguan national finances, limiting and controlling who could receive loans, ostensibly seeking to stabilize the economy and to shore up the US-approved regime (Gobat 174). It is in these years that Nicaragua entered what Gobat describes as “the lengthiest occupation in Latin America” (100).

When civil war again broke out again in 1926, the US once more launched a full invasion in an attempt to reestablish democratic order, founding the Nicaraguan *Guardia Nacional* to ensure stable elections (205). Although the purpose of the *Guardia* “was to secure a stable, pro-US political order,” this armed body would become the power by which a dynastic dictatorship would later rule Nicaragua for over half a century (Gobat 206). Foreshadowing this political near-future, reactionary Conservatives, after losing power in the US-run elections of 1928, began to move farther from the political Center, making fascist overtures and calling for a more authoritarian Catholic government (221-223). It was out of this turbulent moment that the *Vanguardia* was born.

**“even the literary dynamite and rifle”:**

***The Vanguardia***

Coronel had returned to Nicaragua from California in early 1927, bringing with him a wide exposure to nineteenth- and twentieth-century US literature, and inspired by the modern, experimental writers he had encountered in *The Dial* and other magazines: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams (Coronel “Un poeta en nuestro tiempo” 135).<sup>93</sup> He brought back some original poems as well, including his iconoclastic “Oda a Rubén Darío” [“Ode to Rubén Darío”], which raised what historian Jorge Eduardo Arellano calls “a journalistic dust cloud” of controversy, for its formal experimentation and its ironic treatment of Nicaragua’s beloved national poet (Arellano 3);<sup>94</sup> Coronel would soon gather to himself a small group of writers and artists, and would begin to cast about for a way to fashion a Nicaraguan literature that could strengthen and represent Nicaraguan cultural identity in the shadow of imperialism. This project began to take shape as the group published in newspapers and reviews. Coronel himself co-directed *La Semana*, a Conservative weekly Managua review that promoted “autochthonous literature, tasting of Nicaragua,” and promoted the arts as “forces generative of national culture” (qtd. Arellano 7).<sup>95</sup>

Although the politics of the group were still in formation, the early journalism of Coronel and Luis Alberto Cabrales—Paris-educated writer and reader of Mussolini, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and others—reveals a growing right-wing

<sup>93</sup> Coronel’s later translations also include European modernists such as the Swiss Blaise Cendrars and the French Paul Claudel.

<sup>94</sup> “...polvareda periodística...”

<sup>95</sup> “literatura autóctona, de sabor nicaragüense...” “fuerzas generadoras de una cultura nacional...”

nationalism in response to what they felt was a crisis of national identity caused in part by US intervention and bourgeois commercialism (5, 7). In an article from *La Semana* of June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1928, Coronel decried the fashionable bourgeois cosmopolitanism of Nicaraguan youth, which left them “tourists of the *mapa mundi*, postal souls” (qtd. Arellano 7),<sup>96</sup> he continued, “They are born foreigners to their native land and they attend liberal schools to emerge completely uprooted” (qtd. Arellano 7).<sup>97</sup> This concern with autochthonous literature and culture continues in *Criterio*, the short-lived bimonthly vanguardist journal founded by Coronel himself. But the focus begins to specifically address US cultural influence: in “¿Cuándo Comenzaremos?” [“When Will We Begin?”], on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1929, Coronel asks why Nicaraguan young people reject their own culture and prefer “a culture in formation, a cosmopolitan culture that is yankee culture” (qtd. Arellano 12).<sup>98</sup> “[W]hen will we, the Nicaraguan youth,” Coronel asks, “begin to immerse ourselves in Nicaraguan culture?” (qtd. Arellano 12).<sup>99</sup>

In 1931 the *Vanguardia* published its first manifesto, “Ligera Exposición y Proclama de la Anti-Academia Nicaragüense,” [“Brief Exposition and Proclamation of the Nicaraguan Anti-Academy”] calling for a promotion in Nicaragua of international avant-garde aesthetics, but at the same time promising to “give free rein to the emotion of **being and being in** Nicaragua,” and “to make this earth and this spirit pleasing, tangible, concrete, able to be assimilated by all, in a word, to begin the artistic re-creation of

<sup>96</sup> “turistas del mapa mundi, almas postales.”

<sup>97</sup> Nacen extranjeros de la tierra natal y van a la escuela liberal para salir completamente desenraizados.”

<sup>98</sup> “una cultura en formación, una cultura cosmopolita que es la cultura yanqui”

<sup>99</sup> “¿cuándo comenzaremos los jóvenes nicaragüenses a embebernos en la cultura nicaragüense?”

Nicaragua” (Mongalo et al. 25, emphasis original).<sup>100</sup> By this point the group included *wunderkind* Joaquín Pasos, the novelist and poet José Roman (a graduate of Columbia University in the late 1920s), and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, who publicly recited an early poem wearing boxing gloves and punctuating each stanza with punches in the air (Arellano 32). The xylograph artist Zavala Urtecho and the writer Luis Downing, both cousins of Coronel Urtecho, joined as well. The group’s manifesto promised a literary revolution in which they would use “even the literary dynamite and rifle,” and they made good on their promise in the same year, when, following a precedent set by many of the global avant-gardes, the group had its first public recital, a theatrical event that included costumes, sound effects, and live readings of poetry (Mongalo et al. 25).<sup>101</sup> As Arellano describes the event, it was a scandal, and therefore a success: “The recital’s success was complete. In Granada it exploded like a bomb. It was claimed that there had been recitations of immoral poems, a complaint that reached the ears of the Bishop. But the Salesians [a Catholic religious order] defended the *vanguardistas* and the matter was closed” (Arellano 33). As it had been for Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* after its 1882 “banning” in Boston, even scandalous publicity was still good publicity for the *Vanguardia*; and it is no coincidence that they would appropriate such a self-consciously polarizing and provocative figure as Whitman in their project of changing Nicaraguan culture.

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<sup>100</sup> “...dar rienda suelta a la emoción de **ser y estar** en Nicargua..” “...hacer esta tierra y este espíritu, amables, sensibles, tangibles, concretos, asimilables para todos, en una palabra emprender la recreación artística de Nicaragua.”

<sup>101</sup> “...hasta de la dinamita y del fusil literarios....”

## Coronel's Whitmanic "Language Experiment"

In fact, of all the many artists and writers of the colorful and contentious Latin American *vanguardias*, José Coronel Urtecho stands out for his almost unparalleled depth of reading of Whitman's work. As a poet and a translator, he was naturally familiar with *Leaves of Grass*, and anthologized poems from it in three separate anthologies. But he also cites from Whitman's prefaces, from *Democratic Vistas*, from Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, and even from Whitman's posthumously-published *An American Primer*. Although he was not always entirely exempt from idealizing Whitman as the nature-loving Father-Poet of the Americas, Coronel's deep reading of Whitman's work allowed him to zero in on something Huidobro and many other Latin American vanguardistas had overlooked: Whitman's project of expressing America using a new poetic language. Finding themselves at the heart of a new literary movement, and embroiled in nationalist and cultural struggles for the soul of Nicaragua, Coronel and the *Vanguardia* appropriated Whitman's powerful national poetic language project into a canon that would redefine Nicaraguan letters, and thrust their nation's literature onto the world stage in a new way.

We know a great deal about Whitman's importance in Coronel's early formation thanks to his memoirs. Having first read Whitman in a translation by the Mexican poet and ambassador Amado Nervo, from a young age, Coronel was attracted to Whitman's ambitious project of expressing a national culture in his verse ("Americanismo" 31): Whitman, he writes, was "the most 'American,' inconceivable outside of his country..."

(“Americanismo” 31).<sup>102</sup> “His poetry was for me from the beginning,” Coronel continues, “and, in a certain way, even continues to be, the United States” (31).<sup>103</sup> In Whitman he found the Americas expressed in all their unique places and peoples: “a breadth of continental proportions, with immense open spaces and unlimited horizons, a powerful ocean breeze...a unanimous chorus of millions of voices, a prophetic and multitudinous vision of uncountable peoples on the move,” which was for him “the discovery, or I should say, the revelation of the world of the Americas” (31).<sup>104</sup> In 1924, when he subsequently read Armando Vasseur’s 1912 translation of the American poet, he glimpsed, but innocently missed, the expansionism implicit in some of Whitman’s “American” verse: “...I imagined motley multitudes invading peacefully territories without limits, crossing immense rivers...building everywhere thousands of towns and great cities, vibrating with machinery and vehicles...” (31).<sup>105</sup>

In a “Nueva poesía americana” [“New American Poetry”], a literary essay in his memoirs of the US, *Rápido Tránsito [Rapid Transit]*, Coronel remembers his early fascination with Whitman’s ability to capture a nation and a culture in verse. He writes, “His poetry was of the land, and above all from the land and the people of America” (51).<sup>106</sup> Translating from and paraphrasing Whitman’s “To Foreign Lands,” Coronel

<sup>102</sup> “el más ‘americano,’ inconcebible fuera de su país...”

<sup>103</sup> “Su poesía fue para mí desde el principio y, en cierto modo, aun sigue siendo, los Estados Unidos.”

<sup>104</sup> “una amplitud de proporciones continentales, con inmensos espacios abiertos y horizontes ilimitados, un poderoso aliento oceánico... un coro unánime de millones de voces, una visión profético y multitudinaria de incontenibles pueblos en marcha...” “el descubrimiento, mejor diría, la revelación del mundo americano.”

<sup>105</sup> “me imaginaba abigarradas multitudes invadiendo pacíficamente territorios sin límites, cruzando inmensos ríos...edificando por todas partes millares de aldeas y grandes ciudades trepidantes de maquinarias y de vehículos....”

<sup>106</sup> “Su poesía era de la tierra, y sobre todo de la tierra y del pueblo de América.”

continues: “I have heard it asked—he [Whitman] used to say—for something to decipher this enigma of America, and for that he was sending us his verses, so that we could contemplate in them what we desired” (51).<sup>107</sup> The Whitman whom Coronel celebrates is the poet of nation and hemisphere: “The beautiful bard of the white beard brought us a program of songs for America...” (52).<sup>108</sup> Coronel translates lines from Section 3 of Whitman’s “Starting from Paumanok” (52):

For you a programme of chants.

Chants of the prairies,  
Chants of the long-running Mississippi, and down to the Mexican sea,  
Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota,  
Chants going forth from the centre from Kansas and thence equidistant,  
Shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all. (“Starting” 177)

On the next page Coronel translates a large portion of Section 15, in which Whitman’s speaker catalogues the specific natural resources of the North America: “Land of coal and iron! land of gold! land of cotton, sugar, rice! / Land of wheat, beef, pork!” (“Starting” 184; Coronel “Nueva poesía” 53). The translated section includes indigenous construction techniques: “the healthy house of adobie!,” as well as Whitman’s naming of the many rivers and lakes: “...land of the Delaware! / Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan!” (“Starting” 184).

By selecting these passages from Whitman’s vast canon, we see Coronel pinpointing Whitman’s poetic attempt to incarnate in verse a national, geographic, and cultural identity, and the Vanguardia would likewise seek to incarnate Nicaragua on the page, by cataloguing and expressing its characteristic words, sounds, native names,

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<sup>107</sup> “Había oído—decía él—pedir algo para descifrar este enigma de América, y por eso nos enviaba sus cantos, para que contempláramos en ellos lo que deseábamos.”

<sup>108</sup> “El bello bardo de barba blanca nos traía un programa de cantos para América....”

customs, and features. To Coronel, one of the most important accomplishments of Whitman's new poetics was his employment of vernacular, native, indigenous, and local diction, including slang, common language, and “aboriginal names” (“Nueva poesía” 53).<sup>109</sup> Coronel Urtecho cites the extensive list of native words from Section 16: “Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kagueta, Oronoco, / Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla...” (54; Whitman “Starting” 186). He is likewise drawn to indigenous words incorporated into Whitman’s English, like “moose,” “chickadee,” and “squaw” (“Nueva poesía” 56).

Perhaps the only Latin American *vanguardista* to know about Whitman’s posthumously-published *An American Primer*, which he probably found mentioned in F.O. Matthiessen’s *The American Renaissance*, Coronel Urtecho even picks out a native word repeated in the essay and in “Starting from Paumanok,” highlighting Whitman’s own fascination with indigenous words, and quotes Whitman’s phrase from the *Primer*: “Monongahela: it rolls with venison richness upon the palate” (“Nueva poesía” 54; *Primer* 30). “Era el poeta adámico,” Coronel continues,

edénico, como Adán en el Paraíso dando nombre a las cosas. Estaba enamorado de todas las palabras y de todas las cosas, y quería para su lengua, como decía en su American Primer, palabras de Canadá, palabras yanquis, palabras de Manhattan, palabras de Virginia, palabras de Florida y de Alabama, palabras de Texas, palabras mexicanas y nicaragüenses, *Mexican and Nicaraguan words.* (54)<sup>110</sup>

For emphasis here, Coronel uses Whitman’s own English wording to highlight the notion

<sup>109</sup> “nombres aborígenes...” However, Coronel does not seem to know Whitman’s short essay “Slang in America,” which explores the linguistically-generative nature of slang, and describes language in democratic terms as “made by the masses...” (1166).

<sup>110</sup> “He was the adamic poet, edenic, like Adam in Paradise giving name to things. He was enamored of all the words and of all the things, and wanted for his language, as he said in his American Primer, words from Canada, Yankee words, words from Manhattan, words from Virginia, words from Florida and from Alabama, words from Texas, Mexican and Nicaraguan words, *Mexican and Nicaraguan words.*”

of an “American” language that draws from truly “American” linguistic sources.

Of course, it is an “America” in which Nicaragua is conspicuously included, and Coronel seems to overlook the potential US-expansionist implications of Whitman’s linguistic embrace of Mexico and Nicaragua—two countries whose territories the US had actually annexed during Whitman’s own lifetime. Although he admires Whitman’s linguistic experiment, Coronel carefully elides the aspects of Whitman’s “American” vision that are contrary to his own. By beginning with the third rather than the first line of Section 3 of “Starting from Paumanok,” for example, Coronel shifts attention away from Whitman’s “Americanos! conquerors!” (Whitman “Starting” 177); although by the 1980s he would later cautiously acknowledge Whitman’s complicity in the nineteenth-century US’s imperialist attitudes, admitting that the US poet “could be considered a little bit imperialist regarding the occupation of Mexico...,” for much of his career he still saw Whitman as a prime model for a poetry of national identity (*Conversando* 47).<sup>111</sup>

In his 2005 article, “‘What A Filthy Presidentiad’: Clinton’s Whitman, Bush’s Whitman, And Whitman’s America,” Ed Folsom probes Whitman’s paradoxical use of this term “America.” The term, Folsom argues, which on the one hand welcomes all but on the other hand might forcibly absorb all, “creates a palpable cultural tension, as if the term itself is at once imperialistic and anti-imperialistic” (108). Yet Folsom also points out that for Whitman, “America” was in no way coterminous with the United States. For Whitman, the “United States” is “a specific expanding nation-state, growing by absorbing semi-independent new states and becoming a nation of nations,” whereas “America” is “a projection of the future, something the United States is a part of, but something that names a wider set of qualities and possibilities, spawned by the various nations of the

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<sup>111</sup> “pudiera considerarse un poco imperialista respecto a la ocupación de México ....”

world sending explorers, settlers, emigrants, to mix and meld and form something new named ‘America’” (109).

James Perrin Warren, in his 1990 *Walt Whitman’s Language Experiment*, likewise interprets what might seem to be Whitman’s linguistic expansionism. He reads Whitman’s appropriation of foreign words as reflecting not a conquest but rather an agglomerative and evolutionary view of language, as well as a belief that the language reflected the free and growing spirit of the “American” peoples (Warren 34-52). “La Fratria Nicaragüense” [“The Nicaraguan Brotherhood”], an early anonymous manifesto-article of the *Vanguardia*, expresses a similarly absorptive notion as the solution to the cultural decline resulting from foreign intervention. Published in the group’s periodical *Vanguardia* in 1932, the editorial poem decries the loss of Nicaraguan identity:

Our language is being lost.  
 Our religion is being lost.  
 Our honor is being lost.  
 Our land is being lost.  
 Intervention is trying to conquer our people. (“La Fratria” 77)<sup>112</sup>

At the heart of the problem, the editorial blames “[a] centrifugal force, that is killing us. / We must return to the center. / We must create a superior force, a centripetal force” (77).<sup>113</sup> This “centripetal force,” it would seem to imply, would be capable of drawing world culture into Nicaragua, while preserving what was truly Nicaraguan at its core.

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<sup>112</sup> “Se va perdiendo la lengua.  
 Se va perdiendo la religión.  
 Se va perdiendo el honor.  
 Se va perdiendo la tierra.  
 La intervención está intentando la conquista de nuestro pueblo.”

<sup>113</sup> “[u]na fuerza centrífuga, que nos está matando.  
 Hay que volver al centro.  
 Hay que crear una fuerza superior, una fuerza centrípeta.  
 ¡Hay que formar la FRATRIA NICARAGUENSE queridos nicaragüenses!”

Likely written by Coronel Urtecho or Pablo Antonio Cuadra, the manifesto reveals the tenuous balance the group was trying to strike: appropriating US and European thought to fight what they felt was the dissipation of Nicaraguan culture in the face of foreign influence, they nonetheless sought to “return to the center” of a Nicaraguan culture that was, at its heart, firmly rooted in Nicaraguan reality (“La Fratria” 77).<sup>114</sup>

### **“Nicaraguan Words” Against the US**

And, like Whitman, they turned to their nation’s language.<sup>115</sup> In her book *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters*, Vicky Unruh has shown that “in Latin America vanguardist inquiries into language were often marked by concrete cultural problems,” and that the avant-gardes were attuned to “language as the site of cultural and social tensions” (210). Likewise, Vera Kutzinski argues that a valorization of indigenous, regional, or other particular ethnic languages frequently formed part of a nationalist rhetorical strategy resisting imperialism.<sup>116</sup> Of course, a rhetorical strategy

<sup>114</sup> It is this synthesis—both independent and cosmopolitan—that Coronel felt Ezra Pound and the Modernists had accomplished, avoiding what he felt was the risk of barbarism inherent in Whitman’s more extreme project. Coronel describes Pound and Dári as “renovators in the proper sense of the word, given that at the same time they brought the newness of an original, spontaneous attitude and they free us from that which is dead in tradition, they reestablished the continuity of the purest living tradition” [“renovadores en el sentido propio de la palabra, puesto que a la vez que traían la novedad de una actitud espontánea original y nos libertan de lo ya muerto en la tradición, restablecían la continuidad de la más pura tradición viviente”] (“Un poeta” 136; 135).

<sup>115</sup> As I discuss in the Conclusion chapter, there is a sense in which Whitman, writing against the backdrop of a still-present European literary hegemony, still saw the “American” language as a way to write back against the Old World. In fact, Whitman was heir to a long nationalist discussion of the “American” language initiated in the eighteenth century by authors such as Noah Webster whose “plan for a coherently innovating American English” includes his 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Simpson 258).

<sup>116</sup> In her chapter, “Antidote to Wall Street,” from her book *Sugar’s Secrets: Race and Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* for instance, Kutzinski argues persuasively that in Cuba the move toward celebrating Afro-Cubanism became a means for writing back against the cultural and economic encroachments of the United States. As such, Kutzinski argues, “the syncretic forms of Afro-Cuban popular music and dance became the new signifiers of a desire for cultural and political independence” (154). Just as Cuban nationalists used Cuban ethno-culture to shore up national identity, the *Vanguardia* turned, as Whitman had, to a cultural and linguistic heritage they felt made their nation unique.

which claims to return to original or originary ethnic or cultural language to self-differentiate from or resist an outside invader is not always without its risks—more especially coming from a mostly-male group of privileged, white *granadinos* like the members of the *Vanguardia*.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, even with its faults, we can understand this move as a strategy of linguistic resistance to US intervention—a resistance of which Whitman very much forms a part.

Pablo Antonio Cuadra's 1934 *Poemas Nicaragüenses [Nicaraguan Poems]* represents perhaps the best poetic example of this return to Nicaraguan vernacular language, employing a rhetorical strategy of indigenous speech and vocabulary to resist the cultural crisis precipitated by US imperialism.<sup>118</sup> Cuadra celebrates the Nicaraguan landscape, its regions, its flora and fauna, its myths and its natives, all the while employing a language that is not simply Spanish, but specifically Nicaraguan. In his “Inventario de Algunos Recuerdos” [“Inventory of Some Memories”], Cuadra refers to drinking a “jícara” of “tiste,” two words of náhuatl origins referring to a gourd-cup and a chocolate beverage (8);<sup>119</sup> he likewise describes the sky as an “upside-down basket,”

<sup>117</sup> Kutzinski argues, for instance, that *Afrocubanismo*'s commitment to national and cultural unity in the face of external threats tended to elide real injustices within Cuba, running the risk of becoming “a folkloric spectacle whose political effect was to displace and obfuscate actual social problems and conflicts, especially racial ones” (143). Additionally, Kutzinski also reveals how cultural rhetorical moves such as this, in conflict with an external enemy, can nonetheless remain complicit in “further entrenching racially and sexually determined social hierarchies” (10).

<sup>118</sup> An earlier text that enacts this experiment on the level Nicaraguan phonemes and morphemes is the 1931 collaborative poem-play *Chinfonía Burguesa [Bourgeoise Chinfony]*, by Coronel and Joaquín Pasos, which combines folk-rhyming and vernacular nonsense wordplay in a cartoonish satire of the bourgeoisie. Unruh describes this play “a manifesto of linguistic nationalism” (*Contentious* 229). In her article on the piece, Unruh situates the work within a larger body of Latin American “hybrid works which combined self-consciously vanguardist strategies with elements of autochthonous expression...” (“*Chinfonía*” 38).

<sup>119</sup> Náhuatl may have been historically spoken as far South as Nicaragua, but Cuadra's use of it here more importantly reflects, from his perspective, the daily words that Nicaraguans used for their experienced reality, and how they used them.

using another word of náhuatl origin, *guacal*, meaning basket (8).<sup>120</sup> He populates his “Oda de Amor” [“Ode of Love”] with New World flora and fauna, many with indigenous names: “zenzontle” (mockingbird), “colibrí” (hummingbird), and “chocoyo” (parrot) (11).

For the *Vanguardia*, then, these Nicaraguan words became a way to write back against the cultural and military imperialism of the United States. Cuadra even dramatizes this verbal and linguistic Nicaraguan resistance in military form, in his book, with the “Poema del Momento Extranjero en el Bosque” [“Poem of the Foreign Moment in the Jungle”], which describes a failed US military expedition into the jungle of Nicaragua. The poem takes place “[i]n the heart of our mountains where we bleed out our problems” (25);<sup>121</sup> but the jungle is disturbed by “500 Americans / 500 terrors in the frightened tree / In the shipwrecked flight of thousands of birds...” (26).<sup>122</sup> The US soldiers kill Nicaraguan men, seduce their women, trample the crops, and violate the natural landscape with their technology by putting up “an iron tree at a parallel height to the coconut palm” (26, 27).<sup>123</sup> But the heart of Nicaragua rebels against this foreign incursion, and “the whole of our civilized savagisms / refuge of the ignored justice of the sonorous and green temple / Pours out a protest, haughty and small” (27).<sup>124</sup> And in the poem the invaders are routed: “And behold, we are witness to the hasty retreat of 500

<sup>120</sup> “...el guacal invertido...”

<sup>121</sup> “[e]n el corazón de nuestras montañas donde sangramos nuestros problemas...”

<sup>122</sup> “...500 norteamericanos / 500 terrores en el árbol espantado / En el vuelo naúfrago de miles de pájaros”

<sup>123</sup> “...un árbol férrico en paralela elevación al cocotero...”

<sup>124</sup> “...el conjunto de nuestros文明ados salvajismos / Refugio de la ignorada justicia del templo verde y sonoro / Vierte una protesta orgullosamente diminuta.”

Americans / Pallidly defeated by our raging and vengeful malaria” (27).<sup>125</sup> Here it is not superior firepower, military tactics, or diplomacy that rid Nicaragua of foreign intervention, but something Pablo Antonio Cuadra positions as particular to Nicaragua: “our...malaria” (27). *Poemas Nicaragienses* even concludes with a glossary in which Cuadra defines and explains the indigenous Nicaraguan vocabulary, as well as the regions, geographical features, flora, and fauna particular to Nicaragua, turning a book of poetry into a pedagogical tool to teach and promote the Nicaraguan identity and culture that the *Vanguardia* felt was deeply threatened by the US.

For all of the group’s elitism and professed anti-democratic politics, their movement still had at its heart a very Whitmanian project of radically democratizing the arts. In his “Ars Poetica,” Pablo Antonio Cuadra writes:

A return is needed  
to the source of the song:  
to find poetry in the current things,  
to sing for whomever  
with the ordinary tone  
that we use in love,  
let Juana the cook smile, understanding  
or let her weep, dejected if the verse is of mourning  
and let the song not banish the glint of the griddle;  
let the day-worker say it recite it in his work,  
let the guitar player sing it  
and later the *vaquero* repeat it in the corral. (30)<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> “Y he aquí que presenciamos el retiro precipitado de 500 norteamericanos / Pálidamente derrotados por nuestra malaria iracunda y vengadora.”

<sup>126</sup> “Volver es necesario  
a la fuente del canto:  
encontrar la poesía de las cosas corrientes,  
cantar para cualquiera  
con el tono ordinario  
que se usa en el amor,  
que sonría entendida la juana cocinera  
o que llore abatida si es un verso de llanto  
y que el canto no extrañe a la luz del comal;  
que lo pueda en su trabajo decir el jornalero,  
que lo cante el guitarrero  
y luego lo repita el vaquero en el corral.”

Here we see the *Vanguardia*'s interest in a usable poetry, a vernacular art accessible to the Nicaraguan common people, much as Whitman imagined the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a pocket-sized book to be carried by working people (Folsom *Whitman Making Books* 15). But even as the *Vanguardia* used accessible, autochthonous Nicaraguan words, themes, and images to reinforce national and cultural identity, its members also utilized the language of the invader to great effect in their dual project of cultural resistance and renewal.

**“that is why I throw them in English”:**

**Resisting the US in English**

Indeed, many of Nicaragua's highly-Americanized Nicaraguan elites were fluent in English, and others, like José Román and Coronel Urtecho, had lived and studied in the US (Arellano 27). In 1918, Salomón de la Selva, a contemporary with the *Vanguardia* but never really associated with the movement, had even published an entire book of poems in English, *Tropical Town and Other Poems*. The macaronic tendencies of the modernists and the avant-gardes are well-known, but a close examination of the peculiar use of English in Nicaraguan avant-garde poetry reveals another facet of the linguistic pushback at work in their literary resistance to US cultural, economic, and military imperialism: like their fluency with US literature, their English-language fluency, while a function of their elite and Americanized status, became a poetic weapon with which to wage war against the US.

Pablo Antonio Cuadra not only used Nicaraguan words to assert cultural and political autonomy but he also—and just as effectively—used US words. In his “Intervención” [“Intervention”], which subtitled itself a “poem to be pasted to the walls,”

he uses the English of the US invaders against them (93):<sup>127</sup>

Ya viene el yanqui patón  
y la gringa pelo é miel.  
Al yanqui decile:  
                        *go jón*  
y a la gringuita:  
                        *veri güel.* (93)<sup>128</sup>

Here the thickly-accented “American” phrase “go home” makes a concrete demand for the withdrawal of the US intruder from Nicaragua, as Cuadra repurposes US English into Nicaraguan words of resistance (93).

Likewise, Columbia-graduate José Román’s masterful “Preludio a Managua en B Flat” [“Prelude to Managua in B Flat”] utilizes English to savagely attack US invaders. Román begins by fondly describing the city of Managua with a Whitmanesque urban catalogue:

Paved streets, carts  
and buses. Lagoons that dream like old poets  
and a laughing lake, that sings that trembles elegant Folk  
cars, wagons, Indians, beggars.... (276)<sup>129</sup>

But the city life is overshadowed by “airplanes, airplanes, airplanes...” and “Many uniforms, chests with medals,” depicting the heavy US presence in a Nicaraguan city

<sup>127</sup> “poema para pegarse en las paredes”

<sup>128</sup> “Here comes the stub-foot Yankee  
and the *gringa* all honey and hair.  
To the Yankee say:

*go jón*  
and to the *gringuita*:  
                        *veri güel.*”

<sup>129</sup> “Calles pavimentadas, carretas  
y buses. Lagunas que sueñan como viejos poetas  
y un lago que ríe, que canta que tiembla Gentes elegantes,  
coches, carretones, indios, mendicantes...”

(277):<sup>130</sup>

El Canal, los yanquis y los liberales, los conservadores  
y toda política, locas ilusiones...  
Leche pasteurizada y Club y Jazz Band  
y por todas partes un English Spoken.  
“Cuantos millones de almas hablaremos inglés.”  
Yes Sir. (277)<sup>131</sup>

Corrupt officers with pejorative English nicknames strut about the city: “Lieutenant Rotten, Captain Damn / Colonels Shark, Commanders Dog / and Generals and Ministers Hell...” (277).<sup>132</sup> Román complains that “everything is foreign,” and that “even your cathedral is imported... Soon we’ll see in it an English Speaking God” (277).<sup>133</sup> And even “el Gran Momotombo,” the great volcano on the shores of Lake Managua, must speak English: “cuando se despierte le dirás: *No Spanish...*” (277).<sup>134</sup> The last five lines are almost entirely English as the US influence reaches its peak at the end of the poem:

Zoos  
Golf y Country Clubs,  
Canal Zone, German, French, English Spoken...  
Managua.  
Yes Sir. (277)

Luis Alberto Cabrales likewise uses English to viciously satirize the sexual

<sup>130</sup> “aviones, aviones, aviones...” “Muchos uniformes, pechos con medallas...”

<sup>131</sup> “The Canal, the Yankees and the liberals, the conservatives  
and all politics, crazy illusions...  
Pasteurized milk and Club and Jazz Band  
and everywhere an English spoken.  
“How many of us millions of souls will speak English.”  
Yes Sir.”

<sup>132</sup> “El teniente Rotten, el Capitán Dem / Coroneles Shark, Comandantes Dog / y los Generales y Ministros Hell...”

<sup>133</sup> “...todo es extranjero...” “...hasta tu catedral es importada... Pronto en ella veremos un Dios English speaking.”

<sup>134</sup> “...when he awakes you will tell him: *No Spanish...*”

morality of the American occupiers in his 1929 poem “La Esposa del Capitán,” [“The Captain’s Wife”]. In it, English becomes the language of promiscuity as the “wife of the Captain of the Marines,” seduces “the young native men” (64):<sup>135</sup> “*Apple, boys?... Y ofrendaba sus dos senos maduros. / Wheat, boys?... La cosecha de bucles y el más íntimo trigo*” (64).<sup>136</sup> Here Cabrales inverts the metaphor of imperialist seduction to strike back, by instead depicting the exploited natives enacting racial and sexual violence against their northern oppressor: “mestizos and mulattos violated / her womb, her belly pale just like the moon” (64).<sup>137</sup> Rather than the white woman making sexual conquests and subsuming the natives into herself, she herself is instead defeated and tainted: “[t]umbled down upon the grass, / filthy with our mud...” (64).<sup>138</sup> Cabrales seals the irony when the Captain’s wife, sexually-sated, counts the stars: “*one, two, three...! ¡cuántos claros luceros!... / y canturreaba, lánguida: Star spangled banner!*” (64).<sup>139</sup> Finally, when the Captain and his wife are transferred to Asia, it is the “Filipino” natives who will have the last laugh at US imperialism, implicitly by cuckolding the US Marine wherever he goes (64).

Joaquín Pasos also wrote several poems in English, including an anti-interventionist poem, titled “Intervention Time 1. p.m.”:

this hour sings obscenities  
over a fat man’s belly on good digestion  
and it belches the words  
this is why I throw them in English. (98-99)

<sup>135</sup> “...esposa del Capitán de Marinos...”, “los mancebos nativos.”

<sup>136</sup> *Apple, boys?... And she offered up her two ripe breasts. / Wheat, boys?... The harvest of curls and the more intimate wheat.*

<sup>137</sup> “...violaban / su vientre, pálido así como la luna.”

<sup>138</sup> “Tumbada sobre la hierba, / sucia de nuestro barro...”

<sup>139</sup> “*one, two, three...! so many clear, bright stars!... / and she sang softly, languidly: Star spangled banner!*”

The Yankee invaders are not only fat but coarse and violent: “another quality of this after glut time / is to be special for roughness . . . / and say: What do you want? And ‘Go to hell’ . . .” (99). And Nicaraguans themselves stand to gain nothing from the presence of the US, Pasos’s speaker warns: “you will never get for your hair a ribbon / or a star from the north-american banner!” (99).

With this level of animosity against an interventionist US, it is little wonder that, even given Coronel’s immersion in Whitman, the *Vanguardia*’s relationship with Camden’s bard was complicated. Not only was he a revered poet of the nation with which they were culturally (and at times literally) at war; but he was a major figure of the century they abhorred, in large part due to right-wing French author Leon Daudet’s 1922 *Le stupide XIXe siècle [The Stupid Nineteenth Century]*.<sup>140</sup> But just as sticky for the *Vanguardistas* was the fact that their “paisano inevitable,” their “inevitable countryman” Rubén Darío had himself very much embraced Whitman, as had many of the Latin American *modernistas*, the prior generation from which the *Vanguardia* initially sought to distance itself (Coronel “Oda” 8). Although Coronel had long been reading Whitman when he founded the movement, not all of the members could bring themselves to openly embrace the US poet their founder had promoted in Nicaragua since 1927.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> See, for instance, pages 36-39 of the anonymous article (probably written by Coronel Urtecho or Pablo Antonio Cuadra) “¿Qué es Ser Moderno?” [“What Does It Mean to be Modern?”] in *50 aniversario del MOVIMIENTO DE VANGUARDIA DE NICARAGUA [50th Anniversary of the VANGUARDIA MOVEMENT]*, special anniversary edition of *El Pez y La Serpiente* 22/23 (1978-79).

<sup>141</sup> In *El Diario Nicaragüense* of Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1927, Coronel had published “Los Yanquis, Poetas” [“The Yankees, Poets”] an encomiastic survey of important US poets, in which he traces the role US poetry has played in world literature. He praises Whitman because he “shouts the glory of the future, healthy, neighing, absolutely free” (“grita la Gloria futura, sano, relinchante, libérmino”), and because his “echo...in Europe lent a renewed vigor to lyric poetry” (“eco...en Europa presto un renovado vigor a la lírica....”) (2a). He promises to write more on Whitman in subsequent articles, but does not fulfill his promise in print until much later.

Pasos, who ran the humoristic newspaper *Opera Bufa*, wrote a strong parodic protest in his 1937 article “I Have Not Read Walt Whitman” [“No He Leído a Walt Whitman”] (*Prosas* II 77-78). Responding, it seems, to group member Manolo Cuadra’s commentary comparing Pasos to Whitman, Pasos glibly writes: “The marked Whitmanian tendency that Manolo Cuadra finds in my literary works, has formed in me the desire to know Whitman. Because I have never read Whitman. I do not personally know that gentleman” (77).<sup>142</sup> Pasos goes on to invent a story about Whitman and Darío: “Once Rubén Darío ran into Mr. Walt Whitman, and, by all accounts, both men got drunk in ‘O’Higgins’ Tavern,’ near Long Beach. From this drinking bout resulted the brotherly affection that Darío always had for Mr. Whitman, who in those days was an amiable and drunken cart driver” (77).<sup>143</sup> Tongue in cheek, Pasos asserts: “Mr. Whitman, I understand, has not ever written a single poem. His fame as an author comes to him from his friendship with Darío and from being, as well, the biological father of the three greatest poets of the US” (77).<sup>144</sup> Pasos protests too much in his claim of ignorance, and he reinforces the joke by claiming that even he himself has never written a single poem (78). But despite good-humored ribbing from Pasos, Whitman would be just as “inevitable” as Darío was for the Nicaraguan group, and just as inevitable as he had been for many of the avant-garde movements across Latin America.

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<sup>142</sup> “La tendencia marcadamente whitmaniana que Manolo Cuadra encuentra en mis trabajos literarios, me ha formado el deseo de conocer a Whitman. Porque yo no he leído a Whitman. No conozco personalmente a ese señor.”

<sup>143</sup> “Una vez se encontró Rubén Darío con el señor Whitman, y según todos los indicios, ambos se emborracharon en ‘O’ Higgins’ Tavern’, cerca de Long Beach. De esta borrachera resultó el cariño fraternal que siempre Darío tuvo por el señor Whitman, quien en ese entonces era un amable y ebrio carretonero.”

<sup>144</sup> “El señor Whitman, tengo entendido, no ha escrito jamás un solo poema. Su fama de escritor le viene de la amistad con Darío y de ser además, el padre natural de los tres grandes poetas de los Estados Unidos.”

## Power, Politics, and the Young

### *Vanguardia*

When Pasos published this satirical article in 1937, Anastasio Somoza García had just begun a dynastic dictatorship that would last more than forty years. When the US Marines had at last withdrawn from Nicaragua in 1933, the guerrilla leader Augusto Sandino had lain down his arms and supported the Nicaraguan government under President Juan Bautista Sacasa. But Somoza, head of the US-created Nicaraguan National Guard, had Sandino killed in 1934, and in 1936 seized power from the unpopular Sacasa in a military coup. Paradoxically, the *Vanguardia* had supported both Sandino and Somoza. Although Sandino's leftism troubled them and their fellow Conservatives, they had approved of his nationalism, his rejection of the bourgeoisie, and his promotion of authoritarian rule as a means of strengthening Nicaragua against US intervention (Arellano 69; Gobat 233-234). Members of the *Vanguardia* even propagandized for Sandino, and once vandalized the elite club in Granada with pro-Sandino slogans (Gobat 240; Manolo Cuadra *Gruñido* 183-184). However, when Sandino affirmed communist ideals in a highly-publicized self-proclamation, Nicaraguan Conservatives severed their ties with him completely (Gobat 263-264). Leaving a presidential dinner on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1934, Sandino was arrested and executed by Somoza's National Guard, and buried in an unmarked grave. The politically-engaged *Vanguardia*, faced with a power vacuum and mistakenly convinced that Somoza shared their anti-US sentiments, rallied behind him, seeing in him the authoritarian leader they felt could shore up Nicaraguan autonomy and deliver their nation from its long crisis (272).

Indeed, the US interventions in Nicaragua in the late 1920s had radicalized many

of the Conservative “oligarch” families of which the *vanguardistas* were a part, and some had begun calling for an authoritarian style of government as the solution to Nicaragua’s problems (Gobat 221-223). Drawing on the examples of Catholic corporatist dictatorships in Spain, Portugal, and Austria, the *Vanguardia* clamored for a new form a government (224). From early in their careers as *vanguardistas*, Coronel and Luis Alberto Cabrales had been influenced by the proto-fascist nationalism of Charles Maurras and had publicly denounced democracy (Arellano 55): in an article from 1929 titled “Invitación a Reaccionar” [“An Invitation to Reaction”] Coronel condemned democracy as a form of government “...false in itself and as such impracticable,” and claimed that it “has been an instrument of deceit that mercenaries and the ambitious from everywhere have used to lead our people to the slaughter” (55).<sup>145</sup> “Democracy,” Coronel continued, “is a principle of disorder and chaos, deadly to the Latin peoples, and above all to us” (qtd Arellano 55).<sup>146</sup>

In the pages of his periodical *La Reacción*, which John Beverly and Marc Zimmerman classify as “proto-fascist,” and elsewhere, Coronel and his *Vanguardia* supported Somoza’s rise to power (61). Pasos himself supported Somoza at first: in his 1935 essay, “We Need a Man” [“Se necesita un hombre”], he implicitly considers Somoza the potential savior of Nicaragua (169-171); and, in another essay from the same year, “Politics, an Issue for the Youth” [“La política, cuestión de jóvenes”], he quotes Benito Mussolini insisting that “the people have been thirsting for authority, for directive,

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<sup>145</sup> “...falsa en sí misma y por lo tanto impracticable...” “...ha sido instrumento de engaño que usaron los ambiciosos y aventureros de todas partes para llevar al pueblo a la matanza.”

<sup>146</sup> “La democracia es un principio de desorden y de caos, mortal para los pueblos latinos, y sobre todo para nosotros.”

for order” (cited 178).<sup>147</sup> When Somoza did take power, some of the group were even rewarded for their loyalty with government positions. But the *Vanguardia* would get more than they bargained for with their new leader, as Somoza launched a regime of fraud, corruption, and exploitation, rigging elections, using the government to enrich himself and his friends, and increasing Nicaragua’s economic dependence on the US (Merill). Disgusted, the *Vanguardia* gradually withdrew from politics altogether.<sup>148</sup>

### **Language, Politics, and Democracy**

How could a *Vanguardia* so complicit in right-wing authoritarian politics still appropriate the poetic project of Walt Whitman, a poet who sang of Democracy in poems like “For You, O Democracy,” “To Foreign Lands,” “Eidólons,” and many others? In fact, Coronel’s writings on Whitman in the 1940s, after the failure of the *Vanguardia*’s political dreams, reveal the continued development and qualification of his thoughts on government and politics in the Americas. Perhaps the firsthand experience of dictatorship at home and the disaster of fascism in Europe during World War II might have helped moderate Coronel’s right-wing attitudes. In his writings on Whitman and US literature in “Anotaciones sobre literatura norteamericana” [“Annotations on US Literature”], Coronel shows a softening towards Whitman’s hope for democracy that implies a distancing from the authoritarian political philosophy he and his group had espoused during their

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<sup>147</sup> “...los pueblos han estado sedientos de autoridad, de directiva, de orden...”

<sup>148</sup> Arellano writes, perhaps with a touch of chauvinism: “The ideal of the reactionaries, then, had failed. They wanted to reestablish hierarchical order, to impose respect of power, to restore the Church to her true place, to promote religious instruction and to combat immorality; finally . . . as is well known, the failure was total” (“El ideal de los reaccionarios, pues, quedó frustrado. Ellos querían restablecer el orden jerárquico, imponer respeto al poder, reponer a la Iglesia en su verdadero lugar, promover la enseñanza religiosa y combatir la inmoralidad; en fin;.... como se sabe, el fracaso fue rotundo” (Arellano 56).

*Vanguardia* days;<sup>149</sup> more importantly he still holds fast to Whitman's literary-political experiment as something promising for the Americas.

Nonetheless, he retains some skepticism about the US form of democracy. He writes, "Walt Whitman speaks of the types of characters created by democracy Has US democracy created even a single type of any value? I only find one child Huck Finn" (76).<sup>150</sup> For Coronel, Whitman's hope for American democracy remains unfulfilled by US history and literature: "Walt Whitman does not believe that the creation and triumph of American democracy are possible if it does not produce a great literature to give life to its ideals and place them before the eyes of the successive generations. However, almost all US literature after Whitman has been of pure disillusionment and of a sense of guilt" (76).<sup>151</sup>

Huidobro had worried that Whitman's America, and his encompassing poetic vision might expand too far, and Coronel expresses a broader skepticism at Whitman's notion that humanity progresses towards a better political order. Criticizing *Democratic Vistas*, he writes: "If evolution brings us necessarily by the path of progress, no matter what we do, even the greatest of atrocities, nothing will be able to stop us But if everything depends on us, what is the object of evolution? And if things are a

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<sup>149</sup> Written in 1946 and 1947 but published in 1974, this essay by Coronel collects some of his musings and notes about Emerson, Poe, and Whitman. For this work, Coronel does not use punctuation, so all spacing and lack of punctuation is original.

<sup>150</sup> "Walt Whitman habla de los tipos creados por la democracia ¿Es que ha creado la democracia norteamericana algún tipo que valga? Yo sólo encuentro un niño Huck Finn"

<sup>151</sup> "No cree Walt Whitman que sea posible la creación y el triunfo de la democracia Americana si no produce una gran literatura, la [cual] dé vida a sus ideales y los ponga a la vista de las generaciones sucesivas. Sin embargo, casi toda la literatura norteamericana después de Whitman ha sido de puro desengaño y sentimiento de culpabilidad"

combination of the two, who will show us the way?” (76).<sup>152</sup> In other words, if American language, literature, and politics, as Whitman believed, are ever-evolving to a better future now dimly perceived in misty vistas, then we cannot make errors, cannot have real setbacks or failures, since everything gets subsumed into the forward-rolling chemistry of progress. But, having himself committed the error of supporting Somoza, which he would forever regret, Coronel feels in a very real way the human capacity for failure and backsliding—for mistakes to have grave and even irreversible consequences, and for human failings to undermine progressive evolutionary forces. But although he qualifies Whitman’s evolutionary optimism, and even if the US version of democracy may have failed in his eyes, Coronel seems to distinguish it from the broader “American” democracy as Whitman imagined it.

Coronel describes Whitman’s, Emerson’s, and Thoreau’s democracy as “A democracy of personalities, of individuals, free, independent, superior men, of aristocrats...,” and continues later on that to “Emerson and Walt Whitman democracy meant bringing independence to every individual” (79, 80).<sup>153</sup> This emphasis on democracy as fundamentally a form of independence—even aristocratic independence—resonates with what Coronel thinks of Whitman’s entire poetic project, because Coronel reads Whitman and other US authors as pioneers of national and cultural independence. In the very first entry of “Annotations,” he praises Poe for “the rigor of his sense of

<sup>152</sup> “Lo que no esclarece *Democratic Vistas* es cómo se entienden la lucha y la crisis, la perversidad del hombre, y la supuesta benevolencia de la naturaleza y su destino superior. Si la evolución nos lleva necesariamente por el camino del progreso, hagamos lo que hagamos, aún los mayores atrocidades, nada podrá detenernos. Pero si todo depende de nosotros, ¿cuál es el objeto de la evolución? Y si la cosa es mixta, ¿quién nos enseñará el camino?”

<sup>153</sup> “Una democracia de personalidades, de individuos, libres, independientes, superiores, de aristócratas...,” “Para Emerson y Walt Whitman la democracia significaba llevar la independencia a todos los individuos”

literary independence He was the most bitter enemy of the imitative, colonial spirit of US literature of his time Longfellow, etc” (70).<sup>154</sup> In Coronel’s eyes, Whitman—to whom he devotes over half of the article’s ten pages—also had this literary and cultural independence. He writes,

To take man, men, (workers), the individual, society, or more accurately, community, the nation, (America), the land, nature, everything, from new perspectives, new points of view distinct from the old ones, with a new liberty and independence to create a new poetry that could form, in its turn, a new type of man...this was Whitman’s ideal. And for him it should also be the ideal of American literature. (74-75)<sup>155</sup>

As far as Coronel was concerned, Whitman believed “that if we put ourselves in the point of view and inside the ways of past civilizations, we will never surpass their works of literature” (74).<sup>156</sup>

This became an important theme in Coronel’s interpretation of Whitman. In his 1949 *Panorama y Antología de la Poesía Norteamericana [Panorama and Anthology of US Poetry]*, Coronel describes Whitman as a “genius of the true American Independence, of the permanent revolutionary spirit of the lands and people of America (53). In a conference he gave to intellectuals and businessmen, he praised Rubén Darió, Poe, and Whitman as “the trinity granting independence, and even to a certain extent initiating, poetry proper to the American continent, and even perhaps in a certain sense [initiating]

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<sup>154</sup> “[el] rigor de su sentido de la independencia literaria Fue el más encarnizado enemigo del espíritu imitativo, colonial, de la literatura norteamericana de su tiempo Longfellow, etc”

<sup>155</sup> “Tomar al hombre, los hombres, (los trabajadores), al individuo, la sociedad, mejor dicho, la comunidad, el país, (América), la tierra, la naturaleza, todo, desde nuevos aspectos, nuevos puntos de vista diferentes de los antiguos, con una nueva libertad e independencia para crear una nueva poesía que formara, a su vez, un nuevo tipo de hombre...ese era el ideal de Walt Whitman. Y para él debía de ser también el de la literatura americana”

<sup>156</sup> “...de que si nos ponemos en el punto de vista y dentro de las maneras de las civilizaciones pasadas, nunca podríamos superar sus obras literarias...”

the culture of the American continent... (“Los Intelectuales” 15-16).<sup>157</sup> As such, Coronel reads both Whitman and Poe as resisting literatures, traditions, and cultures that sought to impose their forms and themes on “American” letters—not a surprising reading, given Coronel’s own literary and political struggle for Nicaraguan cultural and political independence.

Good or bad, democracy had high stakes for Coronel. Musing in “Anotaciones” on Whitman’s notion of American democracy as an experiment, Coronel warns: “But if this experiment fails America will have failed and with it western culture, as the ancient cultures failed (Egyptian, Caldean, Hellenic, etc)—and the Spenglerian cyclical revolution of the earth with its cultures will continue” (“Anotaciones” 77).<sup>158</sup> Coronel fears that the rapid pace of history in the Americas has endangered its future: “... we have not even had time, nor do we have time or leisure enough still, to set ourselves to think in peace and tranquility about so many problems that remain to be solved” (77).<sup>159</sup> “But,” Coronel continues, “what is distinctively American, as Walt Whitman felt, is hope” (77).<sup>160</sup> Indeed Coronel seems to have still shared some of this hope several years later in 1949, when he writes of Whitman’s project: “With this experimental orientation the literature of this century, of all of America, has been notably enriched, which seems to inspire hopes in a new American cultural synthesis, in which reality and dream, science and mystery,

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<sup>157</sup> “La trinidad independizadora, y aún, en cierta medida, iniciadora de la poesía propia del continente americano, y hasta quizás también en un cierto sentido de la cultura americana continental...”

<sup>158</sup> “Pero si falla este experimento habrá fallado América y con ella la cultura occidental, como fallaron las antiguas culturas (egipcia, caldea, helénica, etc)—y seguirá la cíclica vuelta de la tierra con sus culturas de tipo spengleriano”

<sup>159</sup> “... apenas hemos tenido tiempo, ni tenemos tiempo ni ocio suficientes todavía, para ponernos a pensar en paz y tranquilidad sobre tantos problemas como faltan por resolver”

<sup>160</sup> “Pero lo distintivamente americano, como lo sentía Walt Whitman, es la esperanza”

combine to create new forms, living and collective” (*Panorama* 56).<sup>161</sup> Although US democracy had failed Nicaragua, Whitman’s poetic, linguistic, and political experiment still offered Coronel the promise of future cultural and national “forms, living and collective” (56).

#### **Afterword: Ernesto Cardenal**

Politically disillusioned, and with their *Vanguardia* days past, Coronel’s group had re-united in the 1940s to form the Catholic “Cofradía del Taller San Lucas” [“The Confraternity St. Luke’s Workshop”], which lasted until 1950, when their activities as a movement ceased. But it is during this era of the 1940s that Coronel mentored one boy who would grow up to be perhaps the most famous of any of his literary contemporaries: the poet, priest, and Sandinista Ernesto Cardenal. Through his long career, Cardenal would come back to Whitman repeatedly, and the US poet would remain for him a figure intimately associated with liberty, fraternity, and a utopian vision of democracy of the Americas.

Coronel and Cardenal were related through Coronel’s aunt, and of their first meeting when he was sixteen, Cardenal wrote that it was “one of the greatest shocks I have ever had in my life” (*Los años de granada* 94).<sup>162</sup> It was Coronel who introduced the young Cardenal to US literature, and Cardenal later studied US literature at Columbia University from 1947-1949, where he immersed himself in Whitman, Pound, and the other writers of the “New Poetry” (Randall Interview 95). Cardenal and Coronel would

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<sup>161</sup> “Con esta orientación experimental se ha enriquecido notablemente la literatura de toda América en este siglo, lo que parece infundir esperanzas en una nueva síntesis cultural americana, en que realidad y sueño, ciencia y misterio, se combinen para crear nuevas formas vivientes y colectivas.”

<sup>162</sup> “uno de los más grandes choques que he tenido en mi vida.”

even collaborate on two anthologies of US literature: the 1951 *Lincoln de los poetas [The Poets' Lincoln]* and the 1963 *Antología de la poesía norteamericana [Anthology of US Poetry]*, both of which devote pride of place to Whitman.<sup>163</sup> “The principal influence on me,” he stated, “and one could say this of almost all the Nicaraguan literature of today, is the North American influence, from Whitman to the contemporary writers, the very newest. Ezra Pound has had a special influence on me” (White Testimony 65).

Cardenal’s appropriation of Whitman can be found in his long lines of free-verse, often verging on prose poems, and in his catalogs. Melis even suggests that “[i]t is above all with Ernesto Cardenal (1925) that the whitmanian line resumes full its trajectory” (Melis 131);<sup>164</sup> he goes on to describe how “[t]he whitmanian (darian, poundian) catalog dominates since the early works of Cardenal” as well as in slightly later works such as the 1960 *Hora 0 [0 Hour]*, even though Cardenal “bends this expressive instrument to fundamentally different demands from those of Whitman,” namely to attack “imperialist penetration” (Melis 135).<sup>165</sup> But also in works such as his 1989 *Cántico cósmico [Cosmic Canticle]*, Cardenal crafts an epic Whitmanian poem, blending verse with physics, history, theology, political, and economic critiques into a kind of universally-absorbing book. As such, Cardenal’s appropriation of Whitman’s style underscores just how readily the expansiveness of Whitman’s verse could be used by Latin American poets to undermine political expansiveness of US foreign policy.

But perhaps above all Whitman has remained for the one-time Sandinista fighter

<sup>163</sup> *The Poets' Lincoln* is a fascinating short anthology of poems by eight US poets to and about Lincoln, and selected and translated by Cardenal and Coronel. Thirteen of the thirty-nine pages are Whitman’s.

<sup>164</sup> “Ma è soprattutto con Ernesto Cardenal (1925) che la linea whitmaniana riprende pienamente la sua traiettoria.”

<sup>165</sup> “Il catalogo whitmaniano (dariano, poundiano)...”, “pieghi questo strumento espressivo a esigenze profondamente diverse da quelle di Whitman.” “penetrazione imperialista...”

Cardenal a symbol of what “America” could be. In his excerpted testimony for Steven White’s anthology *Culture and Politics in Nicaragua*, Cardenal distinguishes, as did Coronel, between US foreign policy and the American ideals of its great thinkers: “We don’t confuse the North American people with imperialism. In the Frente Sandinista’s anthem, there’s a part that says: ‘the yanqui, enemy of humanity. That’s imperialism. But there is a certain spirit of the people in the United States that is with us” (Testimony 64). He continues:

The mystic of Nature, Henry David Thoreau, who was imprisoned because he refused to pay taxes in protest against the war with Mexico, is with us. And with us is that mystic of man’s independence, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And with us is Whitman, the great mystic of democracy who dreamed of a paradise on American soil where all men and women were comrades, and who sang the fraternity of all humanity and peoples on earth.” (64)

After a long list of US writers and thinkers, Cardenal states: “All these figures I have just evoked are with the cause of the Nicaraguan people. The great North American poets I’ve mentioned would really like the poetry of these new poets of the people, of the new Nicaragua, their brothers—Whitman would have called them comrades” (White Testimony 64-65).

## CHAPTER THREE

### “THE EXALTATION OF MODERN LIFE”: WHITMAN AMONG THE MEXICAN STRIDENTISTS

In the summer of 1929, the Mexican writer and revolutionary Germán List Arzubide received secret orders from the Communist party. List, a fierce-looking young man with a mass of curly hair, was to smuggle a captured US flag to the upcoming anti-imperialist congress in Frankfurt, Germany. The flag had been taken from US forces in Nicaragua by the *guerrilla* resistance fighter Augusto Sandino, and Uncle Sam was now hot on its trail. To complicate matters, List would have to transport the enormous flag—signed and inscribed by Sandino himself—through New York City on his way to Europe. He proudly recalled in a 1976 interview:

When I arrived in Monterrey there was a fellow there and he found me some cords. I took off my clothes, and I wrapped it [the flag] around my body, and so I passed it through the United States. And when I arrived in New York, incidentally, on the Fourth of July, I went to stay at the house of a Chilean friend who had a balcony over the street and there in the balcony, on the Fourth of July we hung the flag that Sandino had captured from the Yankees. (Bolaño “Tres Estridentistas” 60)<sup>166</sup>

List successfully escaped detection, and went on to smuggle the war trophy to Germany as ordered. Probably unbeknownst to him, List’s actions made this captured flag a symbolic point of contact between the recently-founded Nicaraguan *Vanguardia*, which was vocally supporting Sandino until the early 1930s, and the lately-defunct Mexican avant-garde movement, *Estridentismo* or “Stridentism,” of which List himself had been the fiery second-in-command.

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<sup>166</sup> “Eso fue en 1929. Llegando a Monterrey había un muchacho y él me consiguió unos cordeles. Yo me desnudé, me la envolví en el cuerpo, y así la pase por Estados Unidos. Y al llegar a Nueva York, que fue por cierto un 4 de julio, fui a parar a la casa de un compañero chileno que tenía un balcón para la calle y allí en el balcón pusimos el 4 de julio la bandera que Sandino le había arrebatado a los yanquis.”

This episode illustrates that although Stridentist writings would be somewhat less vocal in their critique of the United States, Mexican relations with the US were no less fraught than those of their later Nicaraguan counterparts. Whitman himself, while his early journalism had supported the US-Mexican war of the 1840s, later admitted that the Mexican nation was “the only one to whom we have ever really done wrong...” (“Attitude of Foreign Governments” 759). Indeed, Mexico had learned a hard lesson about the expansive disposition of their northern neighbor, during the United States’ territorial annexations and occupation of Mexico City in the mid-nineteenth century. These aggressions were later echoed in the twentieth century, during the Mexican Revolution, when President Woodrow Wilson sought to help overthrow the dictator José Victoriano Huerta, and landed US troops to occupy the Mexican ports of Veracruz and Tampico.<sup>167</sup> Although the occupation was relatively abortive, it came as a stark reminder of just how vulnerable Revolutionary Mexico was, and how vulnerable it would likely be afterwards.

But by 1929, when List was smuggling Sandino’s captured US flag across the Atlantic to denounce imperialism, Mexican *Estridentismo* was as dead and buried as many of the Mexican Revolutionary heroes. In 1927, the same year José Coronel had returned to Nicaragua from San Francisco to found his *Vanguardia*, the Mexican Stridentists had been scattered forever by the overthrow of their patron General Heriberto Jara, the progressive governor of the state of Veracruz, under whom several members had state appointments. Mexico was still rumbling with the aftershocks of the Revolution, and with the downfall of Jara, the writers and artists that had formed this contentious Mexican

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<sup>167</sup> See Michael J. Gonzales (107-110).

avant-garde movement drifted into their own spheres of art or politics. After just six meteoric years, Stridentism had fallen silent.

But from its founding in 1921, by the young law student and provocateur Manuel Maples Arce, *Estridentismo* had more than lived up to its name. Fusing a volatile mixture of Mexican Revolutionary ideology, youthful anti-establishment attitudes, and avant-garde aesthetics, the Stridentists sent ripples across the Americas and parts of Europe, as their post-Revolutionary project fought to modernize a Mexican national culture they felt was stagnant, backwards, and sterile. Two of the members, Germán List Arzubide and Leopoldo Méndez, would later join the Communist Party, but the rest of the group remained unaffiliated Leftists, working hard to implement the political, social, and aesthetic ideas of the Mexican Revolution. The leaders were poets, but the group also included visual artists like the French-Mexican Jean Charlot and the US-educated Fermín Revueltas, and the movement also collaborated with artists such as the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, the US photographer Edward Weston and the Italian photographer Tina Modotti. In their verse, the Stridentist poets sought to supplant the themes and imagery of Darío's *modernismo* with a radical, up-to-date, and more boldly modern imaginary (Flores 66): the urban landscape, the machine, mass communication, and the power of the proletarian masses.

Little wonder, then, that we find Whitman among the Stridentists. As Luis Mario Schneider writes, “aside from the influence that the US poet has on the Stridentists, especially in a poetry that identifies itself in the tumult of life and the senses, there is the proof that they mention him directly and continually” (*Estrategia* 36).<sup>168</sup> The “mention”

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<sup>168</sup> “...al margen de la influencia que el poeta norteamericano ejerce en los estridentistas, especialmente en una poesía que se reconoce en el tumulto de la vida y de los sentidos, hay la constatación de que lo

of Whitman's name, the selective incorporation of some of his poetic themes, and the reference to specific poems makes up an intriguing network of Whitman appropriation within the Stridentist movement. This chapter reveals how *Estridentismo* used Whitman as part of its strategic push to bring Mexico forcefully into conversation with global modernity. I argue that these writers, seeking to thrust Mexican culture onto the modern world stage, used Whitman in two overlapping ways: first, to legitimize and reinforce their urban-industrial poetics, and second, to resist the dehumanization and alienation implicit in that very aesthetic. Examining the primary poetic texts of the movement, against the backdrop of its periodicals and visual arts, this chapter reveals how from the pens of these writers, a Stridentist Whitman emerges, working to usher Mexico into the unsettling but exhilarating experiences of twentieth-century modernity.

### **“Chopin to the Electric Chair!”:**

#### **The Birth-Shout of *Estridentismo***

Mexico had been struggling with modernity for decades, but had made some real—if mixed—gains during the long authoritarian regime of Don Porfirio Díaz. Under Díaz, modernization had begun in earnest: a stable government brought more foreign investment in industries such as mines and railroads, and public education began to boost literacy. The Mexican government developed infrastructures like sewers and prisons, and thousands of kilometers of newly-laid railway tracks increased traffic, commerce, and industry across Mexico’s vast expanses. But a deep inequality and a smoldering political discontent lay under the appearances of prosperity and stability.<sup>169</sup> Díaz’s rule, called the

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mencionan directa y continuamente.”

<sup>169</sup> In his book *The Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940*, Michael J. Gonzales writes of “a fundamental contradiction of the Porfiriato: a regime committed to economic modernization without alteration of

*Porfiriato*, held for nearly three decades until he was overthrown in 1911, and the violence and upheavals of the subsequent decade-long Revolution threatened all of Mexico's efforts to become a modernized nation. Modernity seemed to have stalled for Mexico.

But one morning in December of 1921, residents of Mexico City's university district awoke to Mexico's very first *vanguardista* manifesto, plastered on street walls beside theater playbills and bullfighting advertisements (Maples Arce *Soberana Juventud* 123). Also circulated to local papers, and mailed to select people around the world, the manifesto proclaimed itself to be "Up-to-date No. 1: Avant-Garde Sheet, Stridentist Pill" ["Actual No. 1: Hoja de Vanguardia, Comprimido Estridentista"] (*Soberana Juventud* 123). On the front side of the large-format, double-sided sheet appeared a photograph of the dapper young author, Manuel Maples Arce, with slicked-back hair and a boutonniere, looking out at the reader with his large dark eyes (Figure A).

As an avant-garde manifesto, "Actual No. 1" strategically followed the norms of its genre. Like the hundreds of other contemporary manifestos disseminated by the international avant-gardes, "Actual No. 1" attacked the literary establishment with typographic virtuosity and a staccato style, seeking, as Vicky Unruh describes the genre, "simultaneously to provoke and court" its mass audience (*Contentious* 35). With choppy, strident slogans and denunciations, the publicity-hungry Maples Arce goaded his Mexican readers: "Death to Fr. Hidalgo" (the revered martyr of Mexican independence), "Chopin to the electric chair!" (Romantic bourgeois sensibility), and—the poster declares

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premodern social relations of production or concepts of justice" (32).

facetiously—“Post no bills” (“Actual” 3, 6, 3).<sup>170</sup> But for all its conformity to the unconventional conventions of manifesto-writing and for all its affronts to Mexican establishment taste, the manifesto nonetheless offered a serious solution to a serious problem: a Stridentist “Pill” for an ailing national culture (3).<sup>171</sup>

For Maples Arce, part of Mexican culture’s ailment was that, in the wake of the Revolution, its art and literature no longer expressed contemporary reality. “Every technique of art,” Maples Arce writes in the manifesto,

is destined to fulfill a spiritual function in one particular moment. When the expressionist methods are unfit or insufficient to translate our personal emotion,—the sole and elemental aesthetic purpose,—it is necessary, and this against all the inertial force and uncultured assertions of official critics, to cut the current and flip the switches. (4-5)<sup>172</sup>

Here, “to cut the current and flip the switches” constitutes a radical break with the literature and culture that has come before, while the new experiences of “personal emotion” described are precisely those evoked in the human subject by the upheavals and changes of modernity, exemplified for Maples Arce by the machine, industry, urbanization, mass communication, etc. Citing the famous phrase of Italian Futurism’s founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti that “[a]n automobile in motion is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace,” Maples Arce adds his own quotidian, mass-culture

<sup>170</sup> “Muera el Cura Hidalgo” “Chopin a la silla eléctrica!” “Se prohíbe fijar anuncios.”

<sup>171</sup> “Comprimido”

<sup>172</sup> “Toda técnica de arte está destinada a llenar una función spiritual en un momento determinado. Cuando los medios expresionistas son inhábiles o insuficientes para traducir nuestras emociones personales,—única y elemental finalidad estética,—, es necesario, y esto contra toda la fuerza estacionaria y afirmaciones rastacueras de la crítica oficial, cortar la corriente y desnucar los ‘switchs’.”

symbols: “I juxtapose my decisive passion for typewriters, and my most effusive love for classified ads” (5).<sup>173</sup> “It is necessary,” he continues later on,

to exalt in all the strident tones of our propagandistic key, the up-to-date beauty of machines, of gymnastic bridges forcibly extended over the cascades by muscles of iron, the smoke of the factories, the cubist emotions of the great transatlantic ships with smoking chimneys of red and black...the industrialist regimen of the great pulsing cities, the blue shirts of the explosive workers...all the beauty of the century.... (5-6)<sup>174</sup>

“Cosmopoliticémonos,” writes Maples Arce in a one-word sentence beginning the tenth section of the manifesto: “Let us cosmopolitanize ourselves” (9). With this single word, Maples Arce addresses two urgent concerns for Mexican culture. On the one hand, Latin America was still considered to be on the periphery of a Western culture dominated by Europe, so to cosmopolitanize meant proving that Mexico could enter into the global conversation on its own merits. On the other hand, as Lynda Klich argues, many Latin American nations had reacted defensively against European culture by shutting out world culture and seeking “to construct a national myth around timeless, rural indigenous cultures...” (*Revolution and Utopia 2*). Klich sees Maples Arce as proposing “an alternative model for post-Revolutionary cultural renewal” that, instead of reactionary indigenism, brought Mexican culture into active participation in the tumultuous global

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<sup>173</sup> “Un automóvil en movimiento, es más bello que la Victoria de Samotracia.” “...yuxtapongo mi apasionamiento decisivo por las máquinas de escribir, y mi amor efusivísimo por la literatura de los avisos económicos.” In 1909, the Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published his *Fondation et manifeste du futurisme [Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism]*, which in gripping narrative celebrated the new age of the machine, of industry, and of a heroic and utopian future. The aesthetic project laid out in his 1912 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* and his 1913 *Destruction of Syntax—Wireless Imagination—Words-in-Freedom*, as Marjorie Perloff describes it, “stands behind or anticipates virtually every *ism* of the early war years, from Russian Cubo-Futurism and *zaum* to Anglo-American Vorticism to Dada” (56-57).

<sup>174</sup> “Es necesario exaltar en todos los tonos estridentes de nuestro diapasón propagandista, la belleza actualista de las máquinas, de los puentes gímnicos reciamente extendidos sobre las vertientes por músculos de acero, el humo de las fábricas, las emociones cubistas de los grandes trasatlánticos con humeantes chimeneas de rojo y negro...el régimen industrialista de las grandes ciudades palpitantes, las blusas [*sic*] azules de los obreros explosivos...; toda esta belleza del siglo...”

discourse about the questions, issues, and aesthetics of modernity (2).<sup>175</sup> Reinforcing the transnational nature of this discourse, Maples Arce's manifesto ends with his "Directory of the Avant-Garde," a long list of artists and writers around the world who for him represented important voices in this aesthetic and cultural conversation. The list includes the Chilean Vicente Huidobro, the French surrealist Guillaume Apollinaire, the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, cubists like Pablo Picasso, the Russian Marxist writer Anatoly Lunacharsky, and many more ("Actual" 12-13). *Estridentismo* had announced itself to (and as part of) the world.

### **From Spain to Mexico: Whitman**

#### **Joins the Stridentists**

It was precisely Maples Arce's own participation in this international avant-garde conversation that had revealed to him just how useful Walt Whitman could be in the context of the new aesthetics. In October of 1921, as he proudly mentions in his December manifesto, Maples Arce had published his poem, "Esas Rosas Eléctricas" ["Those Electric Roses"], in *Cosmópolis*, a periodical of the Spanish avant-garde movement called *Ultraísmo* [Ultraism]—a movement dedicated to promoting the new aesthetics that were taking the world by storm ("Actual" 4). Ultraism and Italian Futurism constituted the two main avant-garde influences on Maples Arce, but Ultraism would have a special importance as the vessel of Maples Arce's first published entrance into the global avant-gardes. Not only that, but this transatlantic textual connection to Spanish Ultraism also reveals, and shapes, Whitman's own entry into the Mexican avant-garde.

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<sup>175</sup> However, Klich also astutely points out that Maples Arce's references in "Actual No. 1" to Mexican landmarks and consumer products firmly locate his vision of modernity in a Mexican space, rather than in a strictly abstract cosmopolitan space (*Revolution and Utopia* 68-69).

Founded in Madrid by Rafael Cansinos Assens, and arguably the first organized Hispanophone avant-garde movement (perhaps excepting Huidobro's dynamic one-man movement), *Ultraísmo* counted among its members the promising young Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and the prolific, deaf Spanish avant-gardist, Guillermo de Torre. Besides the journal *Cosmópolis*, the movement disseminated its texts and ideas across a number of other important journals including *Cervantes* (founded by Cansinos Assens), *Grecia*, and *Ultra*, all journals with which Maples Arce demonstrated familiarity, and many of whose editors and contributors appear in his “Directory of the Avant-Garde” (Klich *Revolution* 44).<sup>176</sup> The publication of Maples Arce's poem in *Cosmópolis* not only reveals *Ultraísmo* as a major source of Maples Arce's *vanguardismo*, but also brought him into fruitful personal contact with its writers and its other texts. Maples Arce recalled in his 1967 memoir *Soberana juventud [Sovereign Youth]*:

With the publication of my poem “Those Electric Roses,” in the magazine *Cosmopolis*, directed by Gómez Carillo, in Madrid, I connected with other European writers. Guillermo de Torre sent me his manifesto *Vertical* and Humberto Rivas his magazine *Ultra*, that he worked on with other young writers: Pedro Garfias, Gerardo Diego, Rivas Paneda, Adriano del Valle, etc. (124)<sup>177</sup>

It is also through these formative transatlantic avant-garde relations that the young Stridentist's exposure to the very idea of a *vanguardista* Walt Whitman seems to begin.

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<sup>176</sup> Klich shows how the “Directory of the Avant-Garde” at the end of “Actual No. 1” draws heavily on the names published in these journals. For an excellent, concise summary of *Ultraísmo* and the journals in which it circulated, see Eva Valcárcel's *La Vanguardia en Las Revistas Literarias*, 10-38. See Schneider *Estridentismo o una literatura de la estrategia* on the presence of these Spanish periodicals in Mexico (33-34). For Maples Arce to have submitted a poem for publication implies his relative familiarity at least with *Cosmópolis*, which as Schneider points out, was of less stature than *Ultra* or *Grecia* (33).

<sup>177</sup> “Con la publicación de mi poema ‘Esas rosas eléctricas’, en la revista *Cosmópolis*, que dirigía Gómez Carrillo, en Madrid, me relacioné con otros escritores europeos. Guillermo de Torre me envió su manifiesto *Vertical* y Humberto Rivas su revista *Ultra*, que hacía en unión de otros escritores jóvenes: Pedro Garfias, Gerardo Diego, Rivas Paneda, Adriano del Valle, etc.”

Whitman's name occurs no less than four times in the very same October 1921 issue of *Cosmópolis* that had published Maples Arce's poem, revealing the way *vanguardista* discourse was already fashioning the US poet into a reference point for the new aesthetics. Two essays by the young Jorge Luis Borges touch on Whitman in a telling manner. The first, "A Criticism of Landscape" [“Crítica del paisaje”], off-handedly snubs the bombastic, technology-loving Futurist movement as “Whitman badly translated into Italian,” and the second, “Buenos Aires,” describes the urban landscape of his beloved city (196):<sup>178</sup> “Although at times an occasional skyscraper humbles us,” Borges writes, “the total vision of Buenos Aires is not whitmanian. The horizontal lines defeat the vertical” (198).<sup>179</sup> Later in the same issue, a book review signed simply by “T,” of the complete poetic works of Argentine panamericanist Manuel Ugarte, says that “notwithstanding his [Ugarte’s] demagogic passion and his social sense of Art, his lyricism finds itself distant from whitmanian multanimism” (“Manuel Ugarte” 330).<sup>180</sup> These three references to Whitman reveal the twofold way that *Ultraísmo* read and constructed Whitman: as a poet of urban-industrial modernity and as a proletarian bard of the masses. Maples Arce and the Stridentists would pick up these two readings and make them their own.

It is tempting to read the anonymous book reviewer’s single initial “T” as referring to the *Cosmópolis* editorial secretary Guillermo de Torre, a founding member of

<sup>178</sup> “Whitman mal traducido al italiano...”

<sup>179</sup> “Aunque a veces nos humille algún rascacielos, la visión total de Buenos Aires no es whitmaniana. Las líneas horizontales vencen las verticales.”

<sup>180</sup> “...no obstante su passion demagógica y su sentido social del Arte, su lirismo se encuentra distante del multanimismo whitmaniana...” The fourth reference to Whitman in the issue of *Cosmópolis* is unimportant, being simply a fact in the brief review of a French book as part of Rafael Lozano’s “Crónica de Paris” (249).

*Ultraísmo* and a regular contributor to the Hispanophone avant-garde discourse.<sup>181</sup> Maples Arce may have read de Torre's “Manifiesto Ultraísta Vertical” [“Vertical Ultraist Manifesto”], published as a supplement to *Grecia* in November of 1920, and he refers to de Torre in “Actual No. 1” as “my spiritual brother” (Maples Arce “Actual” 5).<sup>182</sup> De Torre's presence in the founding manifesto of *Estridentismo* provides an important clue to Maples Arce's perception of Walt Whitman as a potential tool for his avant-garde project, for de Torre himself was at work appropriating Whitman into his *vanguardista* practices. A 1920 article about de Torre in *Cervantes* by Joaquín de la Escosura—another writer who appears in Maples Arce's “Directory”—describes de Torre's “epigonic admiration for Whitman, Verhaeren, Marinetti,” among others, and argues that Whitman was one of de Torre's aesthetic “evolutionary ancestors” (Maples Arce “Actual No. 1” 12; de la Escosura 88, 94).<sup>183</sup> Likewise, in his 1921 “Estética del yoísmo ultraísta” [“The Aesthetics of Ultraist I-ism], an orally-delivered version of which Maples Arce refers to in “Actual No. 1,” de Torre refers to the “multitudinous rumble” of Whitman's voice (Maples Arce “Actual”; “Ultra-manifestos” 53).<sup>184</sup>

In fact, over the years leading up to 1921, Ultraist journals had consistently come back to Whitman as a metaphor for modernity, and as a touchstone against which to test avant-garde aesthetics. One of these journals was the Seville magazine *Grecia*, a former *modernista* review that became a prime disseminator of the avant-garde. Like so many

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<sup>181</sup> Fernando Alegría, in *Walt Whitman en Hispanoamérica* [*Walt Whitman in Latin America*] traces some of de Torre's writings on Whitman's influence on the new aesthetics of the avant-garde, especially pages 155-157.

<sup>182</sup> “...mi hermano espiritual...”

<sup>183</sup> “su epigónica admiración por Whitman, Verhaeren, Marinetti...” “ascendientes evolutivos...”

<sup>184</sup> “estremecimiento multitudinario...”

others, its founder, Isaac del Vando Villar, and its editor-in-chief, Adriano del Valle, both appear in Maples Arce's "Directory of the Avant-Garde" (Maples Arce "Actual No.1" 12). In April of 1919, del Valle had written an article called "La Nueva Lírica y la Revista 'Cervantes'" ["The New Lyric and the Magazine 'Cervantes'"] crediting Whitman's "prolific seed" as the source of the new aesthetics sweeping Europe (13).<sup>185</sup> The next month, the monthly *Ultraísta* magazine *Cervantes*—like *Grecia* once a *Modernista* magazine—published a centennial homage to Whitman, by Eugenio Montes, who like the others appears in Maples Arce's "Directory of the Avant-Garde" (Maples Arce "Actual" 12). Montes praises Whitman for his portrayal of "multitudes intoxicated with tentacular vitality, new democratic directives, contending and striding war, the skyscraper thirsting for altitude, greedy for stars, the locomotive, swift as an electric message..." (73-74).<sup>186</sup> "The Italian futurists, Herman Bang," Montes continues later on, "in the exaltation of the city-like feverishness of the urbe [...] have received fervid impulses from the son of Long Island" (74).<sup>187</sup>

It is this Walt Whitman that comes to Maples Arce at the founding of his Stridentist movement. Through his contact with these *Ultraísta* periodicals, Maples Arce had witnessed firsthand how the "fervid impulses" of Whitman's experimental poetics could become not merely a model but instead a legitimizing presence for an avant-garde committed to urban-industrial and proletarian poetics. By invoking Whitman, the

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<sup>185</sup> "...semilla prolífica..."

<sup>186</sup> "El cantó las multitudes ebrias de vitalidad tentacular, las nuevas directrices democráticas, la guerra propugnante y caminadora, el rascacielos sediento de / altura, ávido de estrellas, la locomotora, veloz como un mensaje eléctrico...."

<sup>187</sup> "Los futuristas italianos, Herman Banq [sic], en la exaltación de la ciudadana febrilidad de la urbe, y los creacionistas franceses con su optimism infantile de juego alocado, han recibido del hijo de Long-Island impulsos férvidos."

*Ultraístas* (as the Stridentists would learn) could simultaneously preserve their persona of radical newness and experimentation while still drawing on the authority of a major poet respected by the prior generation of *modernistas*. Whitman becomes, then, a way to legitimize a boundary-pushing aesthetic celebrating the heretofore “unpoetic” realities of modernity, especially the machine and the masses. In other words, he remains an experimental and radical poet who could nonetheless lend credibility to an aesthetic movement at which much of the dominant cultural establishment still scoffed. And it is this Walt Whitman that Maples Arce would invoke in his most radical book: *URBE*.

### ***URBE: Whitman and the Stridentist City***

For Maples Arce, the radical urban-industrial and proletarian aesthetic lay very much at the heart of Whitman’s legacy. In a later interview by Roberto Bolaño, Maples Arce insisted that it was not Marinetti and the Italian Futurists who revealed to him these aspects of the new poetics, but Whitman: “The exaltation of modern life, of machines and work dates back earlier. Withman [sic] and Verhaeren felt fervor for these manifestations of our century’s civilization” (Bolaño 54).<sup>188</sup> Maples Arce had already tentatively ventured into this poetic vein with his 1922 *Interior Scaffolding: X-ray Poems [Andamios interiores: Poemas radiográficos]*, which included “Esas Rosas Eléctricas” [“Those Electric Roses”], the poem which *Cosmópolis* had published the year before. The unorthodox poetic imagery and creative syntax of *Andamios interiores* suggest early *Estridentismo*, but some, like Schneider, have noted the after-effects of earlier aesthetics, in particular the romantic mode (*Estrategia* 54). Nonetheless, the book chronicles the passing away of the old poetry, and at the end of the book, the poetic speaker finds

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<sup>188</sup> “La exaltación de la vida moderna, de las máquinas y del trabajo data de antes. Withman [sic] y Verhaeren sintieron fervor por estas manifestaciones de la civilización de nuestro siglo.”

himself alone in “The convulsive city” to face the “Tragic chimneys... / And the smoke of the factories!” (“Como una gotera” 78, 79).<sup>189</sup> Alone, facing the new realities of modern urban life, the poetic speaker sees something promising for the first time: “In the Nordic street corners there are red manifestos” (79).<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the relationship between the Revolutionary masses and the urbe would be key to the Stridentist project.

Maples Arce’s next book, the 1924 *URBE*, represents his most striking experimentation with the vibrating, chaotic aesthetic of the new City, and it is also in this book that he first associates Whitman’s name with his movement. The book’s full title, *URBE: Super-poema Bolchevique en 5 cantos de Manuel Maples Arce* [*VRBE: Bolshevik Super-Poem in 5 Cantos by Manuel Maples Arce*], reveals both its urban-industrial and its proletarian revolutionary thrust.

The book’s first lines set the tone:

Here is my poem  
brutal  
and multanime  
to the new city. (I)<sup>191</sup>

Maples Arce uses this same unusual word *multánime* (multanimous, literally many-souled), which the anonymous reviewer “T” (likely the Ultraist de Torre) had used to describe Whitman’s poetics, a word which, intriguingly, does not appear in the *Real Academia* Spanish dictionary. The city is “all tense / with cables,” the poem continues,

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<sup>189</sup> “La ciudad paroxista...” “Trágicas chimeneas...” “¡Y el humo de las fábricas!”

<sup>190</sup> “En las esquinas nórdicas hay manifestos rojos.”

<sup>191</sup> “He aquí mi poema  
brutal  
y multánime  
a la nueva ciudad.”

and “all sonorous / with motors and with wings” (Maples Arce *URBE* I).<sup>192</sup> The poem declares that “In the spatial plane,” there is:

A simultaneous explosion,  
of the new theories  
a little beyond  
Witman [sic] and Turner<sup>193</sup>  
and a little nearer  
to Maples Arce. (I)<sup>194</sup>

Maples Arce situates Whitman’s name (and his modern poetic authority) in a poem that celebrates “The wharves. The docks. / The cranes,” as well as “[t]he sexual fever of the factories” (I emphasis in the original).<sup>195</sup> By claiming to move “a little beyond” Whitman, Maples Arce can simultaneously legitimize this modern aesthetic through its predecessor, while at the same time claiming the experimental newness of the avant-garde by superseding it and bringing a proletarian, urban-industrial poetics into the twentieth-century city.

Francisco Javier Mora, in his book on List and Stridentism, perceives a simultaneous naïveté and ominousness in *Estridentismo*’s celebration of the urban-industrial aesthetic:

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<sup>192</sup> “toda tensa / de cables” “sonora toda / de motores y de alas”

<sup>193</sup> The most likely candidate for this curious reference is the British Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). Turner’s body of work includes many dramatic natural landscapes, but also features the unique 1844 painting “Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway,” which depicts a locomotive approaching toward the viewer. This is the best speculation I can offer as to why Maples Arce mentions Turner, except perhaps for the dramatic, luminous quality of many of his vistas.

<sup>194</sup> “Explosión simultánea  
de las nuevas teorías,  
un poco más allá  
En el plano espacial  
de Witman y de Turner  
y un poco más acá  
de Maples Arce.”

<sup>195</sup> “Los muelles. Las dársenas. Las gruas.” “Y la fiebre sexual / de las fábricas.”

...their unconditional devotion to the miracles of modernization is based on the fact that Mexico had not yet reached the processes of alienation and destruction that technology was producing in Europe. But not just upon this fact. The machine had been converted into an anti-artistic object, antihuman, that reflects very well the desire for dehumanization (or of superhumanization) provoked by the ideological crisis at the end of the prior century. (Mora 93)<sup>196</sup>

*Pace* Mora, and while acknowledging that for Mexico, full modernization was still in the future, I argue that the Stridentists were indeed very much aware of the dehumanizing and destructive potential of the modern realities they celebrated in their poetry. Maples Arce had already dramatized the alienation of the modern human subject in *Andamios interiores*, where the poetic speaker wanders along the streets of “the rebellious city of glowing signs” (“Prisma” 18).<sup>197</sup> He laments a lover separated from him by technology of travel: “...and a locomotive / thirsting for kilometers, ripped her from my arms” (18-19).<sup>198</sup> The technology of the telephone separates lovers rather than uniting them: “Today her words sound more frozen than ever. / And the madness of Edison suffers at the hands of the rain!” (19). Industry, machinery, and the technology of modern urban life overwhelm the speaker:

Locomotives, shouts,  
shipyards, telegraphs.

Love and life  
are today trade-unions

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<sup>196</sup> “Sin embargo la visión eufórica de los estridentistas que publican el primer manifiesto a las puertas del año 1922, su optimismo maquinista, su entrega sin condiciones a los milagros de la modernización se basa en el hecho de que México todavía no había alcanzado los procesos de alienación y destrucción que la tecnología estaba produciendo en Europa. Pero no solamente en este hecho. La máquina se ha convertido en un objeto antiartístico, antihumano, que refleja muy bien los anhelos de deshumanización (o de superhumanización) provocados por la crisis ideológica de finales del siglo anterior....”

<sup>197</sup> “...la ciudad insurrecta de anuncios luminosos...”

<sup>198</sup> “...y una locomotora / sedienta de kilómetros, la arrancó de mis brazos.”

and everything expands in concentric circles.” (20)<sup>199</sup>

Here even organized labor becomes an impersonal, anonymous substitute for “love and life” in the city (20).<sup>200</sup>

As Elissa Rashkin has astutely noted in her book *The Stridentist Movement in Mexico*, Jean Charlot’s woodcut illustrations for Maples Arce’s *URBE* likewise show an awareness of the tension between modern urban industrial realities and the human subject (120-122). Charlot’s xylograph images of twin skyscrapers (Figure B), an enormous ocean steamer set against the cityscape, and a train on a high bridge, seem to foreground the dehumanizing and alienating forces of the city and the machine. The skyscrapers dwarf the small dots representing human beings. The ocean steamer looms threateningly over two tiny people who seem to be jumping overboard into the sea. A small female figure waves a handkerchief at the train, which presumably takes away her loved one. Charlot has here visually captured the destructive and isolating power of the massive artificial structures of modernity. Rashkin writes: “Again, it is as if humanity itself is dwarfed by the artifacts of technological innovation...” (120).

Another *Estridentista*, the French-educated Luis Quintanilla del Valle (writing under the pseudonym Kyn Taniya), elaborated on the alienation experienced in the overwhelming urbe in his 1923 poem “Departure” (“Partida”):

I HAVE FOUND SOMEONE SEATED IN A TAXI.  
IS IT A STRAW DUMMY OR RATHER A DEAD YOUNG MAN?

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<sup>199</sup> “Locomotoras, gritos,  
arsenales, telégrafos.

El amor y la vida  
son hoy sindicalistas  
y todo se dilata en círculos concéntricos.”

<sup>200</sup> “El amor y la vida...”

TODAY PAIN BIT MY HEART STRONGLY  
 AND THAT IMMOBILITY I KNEW IT WAS MY OWN  
 WHEN MY EYES FOUND THE REFLECTIVE SHOP WINDOW  
 ALL THE BUILDINGS WANTED TO INVADE ME. (77)<sup>201</sup>

Here the lone poetic speaker sees himself from the outside, seeing his reflection as “A STRAW DUMMY” and “A DEAD YOUNG MAN,” and threatened by “THE BUILDINGS” that seek to “INVADE” him (77).<sup>202</sup> Who better than Walt Whitman to counter this modern city that isolates and alienates its citizens? For Whitman takes the same urban setting and finds in it love and human affection.

In fact, for Whitman what determines or defines the true greatness of a city comes not from its buildings, or its machines, its prosperity or its modernity, but from its people, bonded together in mutual affection. In his poem to Manhattan, titled “Mannahatta,” the greatness of his beloved city lies not just in its “Numberless crowded streets” and the “high growths of iron,” but more importantly in “A million people—manners free and superb—open voices—hospitality—the most courageous and friendly young men...” (585, 586). “What do you think endures?”, Whitman writes in his poem “Song of the Broad-Axe,” “Do you think a great city endures?” (334). “A great city,” his speaker continues, “is that which has the greatest men and women...”; “Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands...” his speaker writes, “There the great city stands” (335). Whitman also lays out his vision for the utopian urbe in his short poem from the “Calamus” cluster, “I Dream’d in a Dream,” where his speaker says:

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<sup>201</sup> “ME HE ENCONTRADO A ALGUIEN SENTADO EN UN TAXI  
 ¿SERÁ UN PELELE O BIEN UN JOVEN MUERTO?  
 HOY EL DOLOR MORDÍO MUY FUERTE MI CORAZÓN  
 Y ESA INMOVILIDAD YO SUPE QUE ERA LA MÍA  
 CUANDO MIS OJOS ENCONTRARON AL APARADOR ESPEJO  
 LOS EDIFICIOS TODOS QUISIERON INVADIRME  
 PARA HUIR CONMIGO.”

<sup>202</sup> “UN PELELE,” “UN JOVEN MUERTO,” “LOS EDIFICIOS,” “INVADIR...”

I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of  
the rest of the earth,  
I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,  
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love, it led the rest,  
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,  
And in all their looks and words. (284)

For Whitman, then, “robust love” rather than simply iron and stone, will make the modern city great (284).

### **Germán List Arzubide and the Inhuman City**

But as Germán List Arzubide, *Estridentismo*'s second-in-command, was well aware, modern urban reality often destroys those very qualities that Whitman celebrates. We can see this evident in List's 1923 *Esquina* [Streetcorner], of which Rashkin writes that its “eight short poems center on the city as protagonist...” (52). Jean Charlot's woodcut illustration on the cover portrays what looks like a spread-eagled—or possibly running—man on the pavement, and a dog at the center of a chaotic urban scene—smokestacks pour forth sparks and smoke, and a skyscraper and apartment building stand at the intersection of two streets (Figure C). Apparent tropical leaves create almost a literal urban jungle. In the poem “Cinemática” [“Cinematic”], List's speaker describes an urban environment devoid of real interpersonal communion:

While at the retail counter, the movie theaters  
put the night up for sale,  
a celluloid kiss  
drips in your memory. (“Cinemática”)<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Mientras en el mostrador los cines  
venden la noche al menudeo  
un beso de celuloide  
se escurre en tu recuerdo.

Everything is for sale in the modern city, including the night, and love; and the real, human, flesh-and-blood kiss has itself been replaced by its image, a “celluloid” version on film (“Cinemático”).<sup>204</sup>

In his 1926 *El viajero en el vértice* [*The Voyager in the Vertex*], the speaker mourns an elusive lover, while moving across a dark and abandoned cityscape:

... the city was threshed by telegraph  
we felt our way with our flaming  
                                arms  
                                along the wall of the tunnels  
and a lost locomotive  
screamed asking the distance for help.... (“Los Pasos” 42)<sup>205</sup>

The speaker sees that “a clamor of romantic perfumes / climbs the crucified architecture,” and that “the last chimneys of dream / pierce the threat / of a sky / without return...” (46, 47). In the last poem, “the falsified / city / by the dawn of her handkerchief / spills into the mechanical night...” (“Desintegración” 61). Ramón Alva de Canal’s wood cut illustrations for *Viajero*, like Charlot’s for *URBE*, augment the feeling of emptiness, absence, and the alienating smallness of the human person amidst the modern city (Figure D). Impassive, giant structures fill the illustrations: city blocks, skyscrapers, and smokestacks, with empty streets at night, and long vacant avenues flanked by ominous buildings. But as we will see below, List, who of all the Stridentists demonstrates the most direct reading of Whitman’s writings, was already hard at work countering this ominous future in both his poetry and his journalism. And Whitman, who insisted in his

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<sup>204</sup> “celuloide”

<sup>205</sup> “... y la ciudad se desgranó por telégrafo  
                                tantemos con nuestros brazos  
  incendiados  
                                el muro de los túneles  
y una locomotora extraviada  
                                gritó pidiendo auxilio a la distancia...”

writings that love, fraternity, and comradeship were eminently possible within the structures and places of modernity, becomes a part of List's Revolutionary proletarian project.

### **Whitman and the Worker: Stridentism and Proletarian Love**

List was not the only one seeking to bring the gains of the Revolution to bear on Mexican modernity. Maples Arce had sung in URBE of

The rivers of blue [workers'] blouses  
overflow the floodgates of the factories  
and the agitating trees  
gesticulate their speeches on the pavement.  
The strikers vomit  
taunts and insults,  
and life, is a tumultuous  
conversion towards the Left. (IV)<sup>206</sup>

Even in *Esquina*, Rashkin sees a shift away from the inhuman aesthetics of the skyscraper, and a descent into quotidian, proletarian modernity at street-level: she notes that “much of the imagery in *Esquina* is notably down-to-earth” (53). “You need to throw yourself down 40 floors / in order to reflect on the path,” writes List Arzubide in one *Esquina* poem (“Silbario”).<sup>207</sup> “It is the spirit of Whitman,” Rashkin writes, “more than that of Marinetti which prevails...” (53). Indeed, Whitman’s construction by the avant-garde as a champion of urban-industrial modernity, coupled with his celebration of the

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<sup>206</sup> “Los ríos de blusas azules  
desbordan las esclusas de las fábricas,  
y los árboles agitadores  
manotean sus discursos en la acera.  
Los huelgistas se arrojan  
pedradas y denuestos,  
y la vida, es una tumultuosa  
conversión hacia la izquierda.”

<sup>207</sup> “Hay que tirarse de 40 pisos / para reflexionar en el camino” (“Silabario”)

laborer and his poetry of loving comradeship, make the US poet a unique bridge for the two prongs of the Stridentist project.

Of all the Stridentists, Germán List Arzubide was the one with the most Revolutionary credentials, since the radical Leftist journalist had actually participated in the Revolution itself. Some critics, and indeed List himself, seek to divide List's poetry during the Stridentist era into two distinct projects: avant-garde aesthetics (*Esquina* and *Viajero en el vértice*), and his work in the proletarian, Revolutionary vein, such as his 1925 *plebe: poemas de rebeldía* [*plebe: poems of rebellion*] (Rashkin 127). But it becomes clear, especially with Whitman straddling these two projects, that they are really one for List. *plebe: poemas de rebeldía*, and List's other *obrerista* (of the workers) work, suggests perhaps the way that Whitman could bridge the two projects of Stridentism: the urban-industrial, modern aesthetic, and the proletarian poetry of the Revolution.

List, perhaps the most vocal of the group in his critique of the United States, dedicated his book *plebe* in commemoration of the death of the Mexican anarchist and writer Ricardo Flores Magón in a US prison in 1922 (Rashkin 126): “To the memory of Ricardo Flores Magón, anarchist, assassinated by capitalism, and to that of all those martyrs of the social fight” (List *plebe* 5).<sup>208</sup> If, as Rashkin suggests, the real protagonist of *Esquina* was the city, the people of the *plebe* poems are instead those subjects alienated by the structures of modern capitalism and nationalism. “Comrade:” begins the poem “manos obreras” [“laboring hands”],

from holding your tool  
your hands have closed  
and today are two rude masses;

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<sup>208</sup> “a la memoria de Ricardo Flores Magón, anarquista, asesinado por el capitalismo, y a la de todos los mártires de la lucha social”

in the bloody dawn  
 that now announces the flight of the past  
 they will be your mute weapons. (17)<sup>209</sup>

*plebe*'s vision is agrarian and proletarian, as in "al soldado" ["to the soldier"]: "Comrade: / they ripped you from the field and the plow / to make you a soldier..." ("al soldado" 33).<sup>210</sup> The book provides a Leftist interpretation of Maples Arce's cosmopolitan vision for Mexico, in its rejection of nationalism. In "la bandera" ["the flag"], the poetic speaker says:

Citizen:

you find yourself submissive  
 before the flag that a soldier raises high  
 don't you know how much blood has spilled? ("la bandera" 21).<sup>211</sup>

The transnational nature of List's Leftist politics, then, led him to reject the nationalist banner as a justification for slaughter, and to empathize with the real human victims of the wars between, and within, modern nations: the citizen and the soldier.

The direct, personal voice of the *plebe* poems, singling out the oppressed and disenfranchised—like the criminals in "a los presos" ["to the prisoners"] and the prostitute in "el quicio" ["the doorjamb"]—echoes Whitman's own concern for the outcasts of society in poems like "Song of Myself" or "The City Dead-House." And List was definitely familiar with Whitman's work leading up to, and during, his Stridentist

<sup>209</sup> "Camarada:

de apretar la herramienta  
 tus manos se han cerrado,  
 y hoy son dos masas rudas;  
 en la aurora sangrienta  
 que ya anuncia la fuga del pasado,  
 serán tus armas mudas."

<sup>210</sup> "Camarada: / te arrancaron del campo y del arado / para hacerte soldado."

<sup>211</sup> "Ciudadano:

te descubres sumiso  
 frente de la bandera que enarbola un soldado  
 ¿No sabes cuánta sangre ha derramado?"

days. In his Puebla-based magazine *To Be [Ser]*, List had published (now apparently lost) translations of Whitman's poetry (Bolaño 58). In the same journal, now under Stridentist auspices, he had in 1923 published a translation of an article by Nicolás Beaudin, "The Psychology of the New Poets" ["La psicología de los poetas nuevos"] that linked the *vanguardia* with Whitman:

Against instability, interior emptiness, incoherence, voluptuous inertia, we oppose balance, self-confidence, proper to aviators, the creative activity, so beloved of 'tourists,' of the great industrialists of the World, and of the kings of business.

Against the adulterated elixirs of Renán and Taine, the anaesthetics of Anatole France, the voluptuous liquors of the first Bourget and the young Earrés, we prefer the generous red wine of Emerson and Whitman. (18)<sup>212</sup>

List would republish this same article in 1926, in *Horizonte*, a publication which I address below.

But List's engagement with Whitman goes deeper, and reveals the way Whitman's poetics could be useful as more than an experimental precursor to urban-industrial aesthetics, as the *Ultraists* had often characterized him. At the end of the movement, when he published his 1928 book *Opiniones sobre el libro “El movimiento estridentista” de Germán List Arzubide* [*Opinions on the book “The Stridentist Movement” by Germán List Arzubide*], List included a significant epigraph from Whitman's poem "Excelsior": "Decidme quién ha ido más lejos, / porque quiero ir más lejos aún / WALT WHITMAN" (*Opiniones*).<sup>213</sup> Seemingly List's own translation, the

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<sup>212</sup> "A la inestabilidad, al vacío interior, a la incoherencia, a la voluptuosa inercia, oponemos el equilibrio, la confianza en sí, propia de los aviadores, la actividad creadora, tan querida de los 'turistas', de los grandes industriales del mundo y de los reyes de los negocios.

A los elixiris adulterados de Renán y de Taine, a los anestésicos de Anatole France, a los voluptuosos licores del primer Bourget y del joven Earrés, preferimos el vino rojo y generoso de Emerson y de Whitman."

<sup>213</sup> Whitman's original reads "Who has gone farthest? for I would go farther...." ("Excelsior" 588).

epigraph does certainly function to endorse the movement and to reinforce the group's experimental project: in the full text of the poem, Whitman's speaker boasts, "Who has gone farthest? For I would go further," and identifies himself as "the son of the brawny and tall-topt city" ("Excelsior" 588). However, the full text of the poem also points to the solution that List felt could counter the destructive forces of modernity: interpersonal love and global fraternity: "And who benevolent? for I would show more benevolence than all the rest / And who has receiv'd the love of the most friends? for I know what it is to receive the passionate love of many friends..." (588). It is a global verse, celebrating an inclusive world poetry: "And who has made hymns fit for the earth? for I am mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole earth" (589). No petty nationalism, none of the alienation of the inhuman ultra-modern urban space; just "love of the most friends," from "the son of the tall-topt city" (588).

### **"Peopled Your Impassive Surfaces": Whitman's**

### **"Song of the Open Road"**

In the Stridentist periodical *Horizonte [Horizon]*, which he directed himself during the movement's prosperous years in Xalapa under the patronage of General Jara, List invoked Whitman in perhaps the most significant reference made by the Stridentists. In an unsigned editorial<sup>214</sup> in the August issue of 1926, List criticized the Argentine journal *Carátula [Mask]* for mocking Marinetti and Italian Futurism. Notwithstanding *Estridentismo*'s own anxiety of influence regarding Marinetti and his movement,<sup>215</sup> List

<sup>214</sup> The note is anonymous, but the unsigned portions of "Notes, books, and magazines" include personal letters to List, and are undoubtedly his.

<sup>215</sup> The similarities between Stridentism and the Italian Futurists range from their enthusiastic and pugilistic tone to the two movements' embrace of the machine aesthetic. Maples Arce name-dropped Marinetti in his *Andamios interiores* poem "A veces, con la tarde..." ["At times, with the evening..."], and quoted him in

defends Italian Futurism with a quote from “Song of the Open Road,” saying “I remind our Argentine friends of this angry phrase of Walth Whitman [sic]: that has no resonance in you, because you are empty of it (“Carátula”).<sup>216</sup>

List’s reference to this particular Whitman poem reveals a great deal about Whitman’s role in Stridentism. Not only does it seem to be List’s own translation of Whitman’s English, rather than the 1918 Vasseur edition, but List’s reference to “Song of the Open Road” sheds light on how Whitman envisioned loving human affection as possible in the urban space. In Section 3, Whitman’s speaker celebrates the urban space, but shapes his representation to make it a personal and human—rather than a dehumanizing and impersonal—space:

You flagg’d walks of the cities! you strong curbs at the edges!  
 You ferries! you planks and posts of wharves! you timber-lined sides! you distant ships!  
 You rows of houses! you window-pierc’d façades! you roofs!  
 You porches and entrances! you copings and iron guards!  
 You windows whose transparent shells might expose so much!  
 You doors and ascending steps! you arches!  
 You gray stones of interminable pavements! you trodden crossings!  
 (Whitman “Song of the Open Road” 298)

Here Whitman enumerates the impersonal structures of the urban environment, but refashions them to have a human, personal meaning: From all that has touch’d you I believe you have imparted to yourselves, and now would impart the same secretly to me, / From the living and the dead you have peopled your impassive surfaces, and the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me” (299).

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the first Stridentist manifesto, “Actual no. 1” (“A veces, con la tarde” 39; “Actual”); yet he simultaneously sought to distinguish himself from him, claiming in the same manifesto “nada de futurismo,” [“nothing of futurism”] and disavowing the Italian Futurist in a later interview (“Actual” 10; Bolaño 54).

<sup>216</sup> “Les recordamos a los compañeros argentinos, esta frase encendida de Walth Whitman: eso no tiene resonancia en vosotros, porque vosotros estáis vacíos de ello.” The passage in Whitman’s original reads, “The past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you, you are vacant of them.”

In Whitman's humanizing vision of the city, even the "impassive surfaces" have been altered and "peopled" by "the living and the dead," leaving lasting human imprints on iron and stone.

Whitman's speaker calls for empathy and fraternity between strangers: "Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos; / Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers? / Do you know the talk of those turning eyeballs?" (301). "What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers?" the speaker asks, "What with some driver as I ride on the seat by his side?" (301-302). It is an adhesive love of body for body: "Here rises the fluid and attaching character," the speaker says, and later on: "Toward the fluid and attaching character exudes the sweat of the love of young and old, / From it falls distill'd the charm that mocks beauty and attainments, / Toward it heaves the shuddering longing ache of contact" (302). The forced juxtaposition of total strangers, so awkward and uncomfortable for many in the modern city setting, becomes for Whitman's speaker an opportunity for both "adhesive" and erotic encounters between the bodies of strangers.

Whitman's speaker calls for his readers to enter into interpersonal communion with him, and to join him on the open road he strides: "Out of the dark confinement! out from behind the screen! / It is useless to protest, I know all and expose it" (306). The speaker calls the true, concealed human subject out of its smothered, false existence in polite urban society:

Behold through you as bad as the rest,  
Through the laughter, dancing, dining, supping, of people,  
Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those wash'd and trimm'd faces,  
Behold a secret silent loathing and despair.

No husband, no wife, no friend, trusted to hear the confession,  
 Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes,  
 Formless and wordless through the streets of the cities, polite and bland in  
 the parlors,  
 In the cars of railroads, in steamboats, in the public assembly.... (306)

The trappings of polite civilized society can kill: “Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones, / Under the broadcloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers...” (306). But if we offer, Whitman’s speaker promises, an honest vulnerability to affection and love, we can come “Out of the dark confinement!” (306).

To remain stationary is to die, which is why the speaker demands that his companions bring with them the best of country and city, rather than staying trapped there: “To take the best of the farmer’s farm and the richman’s elegant villa,” and “To take to your use out of the compact cities as you pass through, / To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go...” (305). But most important is love: “To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts, / To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you....” Undoubtedly attracted to Whitman’s brash persona, the Revolutionary List quotes from a poem that proclaims: “My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion....” But finally, it is Whitman’s fraternal love that ends the poem, and seals Estridentismo with a promising dose of proletarian fraternity: “Camerado, I give you my hand! / I give you my love more precious than money, / ... / Will you give me yourself?” (307).

## **Stridentopolis: Stridentist Modernity in Practice**

The Stridentist project, then, sought to humanize modernity, to reconcile urban-industrial structures with the proletarian and egalitarian aesthetics of the Revolution, and to use these structures to promote that Revolution. During their more prosperous years in Xalapa, the capital of the state of Veracruz, the Stridentists had a real—if short-lived—opportunity to bring their ideas into the social, civic, and political spheres, as they worked to turn their city into what they called “*Estridentópolis*.” In 1926, General Heriberto Jara, the governor of Veracruz, appointed Maples Arce to be his General Secretary, a position of importance and considerable influence. List was already in Veracruz as Maples Arce’s assistant, but this promotion led Maples Arce to invite the other Stridentists to join him; many received state appointments, and the group launched various books and periodicals to promote their movement (Rashkin 168). Rashkin writes, “This period marked a new phase in the Stridentist movement, in which the aesthetic concerns of the group merged with the social ideology of the Jara administration, producing a politicized, experimental avant-garde in collaboration with an equally experimental state government...” (169). Indeed, it is here, in their last two years as an avant-garde, that the Stridentist could try out their revolutionary and ultra-modern aesthetics in society.

On the surface, Xalapa was the last place to look for an artistic movement celebrating industry and the modern city. Although it had been a frequent site of conflict during the Revolution, it was now relatively quiet, and at more than two hundred miles from Mexico’s capital, Xalapa was a far cry from the bustling, chaotic center. This irony

was not lost on Enrique Barreiro Tablada, who in 1925 went to interview Maples Arce in his new environs. Barreiro marvels at finding the poet of *Urbe* in the “provincia,” that is, the provinces, and wonders whether Maples Arce has been affected by the “dullness” of life outside of Mexico City (“El ‘Joven Maestro’”).<sup>217</sup> Maples Arce responds, “I miss the noise, the multitudinarianism of the capital, the vigor, the protest” (“El ‘Joven Maestro’”).<sup>218</sup>

But in another sense, Xalapa was quite well-suited to embrace the Stridentists and their Revolutionary project. Rashkin describes the state of Veracruz as “notorious in Mexico as a hotbed of leftist activity,” and describes this period as “the ‘radical years,’ in which socialist communist, and anarchist doctrines flourished, and nearly every sector, from industrial workers to campesinos, slum tenants, and the unemployed, was represented by at least one union” (Rashkin 170). Granted, actual modernization was still somewhat in the future for Veracruz, but the signs were there of the coming change. Rashkin describes:

Communications systems were improving, driven in part by the needs of foreign oil companies in the state. Gas stations were springing up everywhere, including in the city’s central square, adjacent to government buildings and the cathedral. Increasing numbers of cars were changing the character of city streets, and with little regulation, accidents were frequent. (170)

This paradox of the already-yet-not-sufficiently-modernized Mexico lay at the heart of the Stridentist’s aesthetic. In her book chapter, “Modernity’s ‘Efficient Agents,’” Lynda Klich persuasively shows that Stridentist representations of urban-industrial modernity were simultaneously accurate—capturing the electrical towers, radio towers, and street

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<sup>217</sup> “opacidad”

<sup>218</sup> Me hace falta la batahola, el multitudinismo de la capital, el esfuerzo, la protesta.”

scenes of their Mexico City and Xalapa—and imaginary—challenging post-Revolutionary Mexican authorities to unite and strengthen the nation through further modernization and infrastructure (267-270).

Still, under the regime of the progressive Heriberto Jara, Xalapa sought to become the modern city, and the Stridentists worked hard to realize that goal. They worked in education, and founded *Horizonte*, a cultural journal in which, among other things, they promoted and reported on projects of modernization like cinema technology, telephone lines, and new radio towers in Mexico. One of these civic symbols of modernity was the 1925 Xalapa stadium, an impressive structure of metal and concrete, meant to be the first part of a major refashioning of the city that would include the Universidad Veracruzana and a planned community called Ciudad Jardín. Rashkin writes, “Here, planners would draw on the best ideas of modern urban design to develop well-organized residential, commercial, and industrial zones. They would pave roads, provide water and electricity, offer developed lots to workers at cost, and carry out construction using worker co-ops...” (172). Unfortunately, Jara met significant economic obstacles in this project, and toward the end of 1927, his government was overthrown by federal troops; the first act of the new interim governor was to fire Maples Arce, who soon after only narrowly escaped arrest.

Although with the death of Stridentism and the subsequent political upheavals in Xalapa, *Estridentópolis* would never ultimately come to fruition, German List Arzubide’s poetic-prose exhortation on the Xalapa Stadium reveals the way that the civic installation expressed the dual project of Stridentism. List’s piece, published in the April of 1926 issue of *Horizonte*, includes a large photograph titled “El Grandioso Estadio Jalapeño”

[“The Grandiose Xalapan Stadium”], and begins, “Over the steps of the gigantic horseshoe of reinforced concrete, sixty thousand people quiver impatiently...” (7).<sup>219</sup> It is a place for the masses, for “a people that renews itself in body and soul,” and a consummately modern space, as List’s vanguardist eye describes it (7):<sup>220</sup> “Below, the gold of the sun that illustrates the moment, having as its background the audacious horizon, and above the breadth of a sky where the airplanes sing the victory of human effort...” (7).<sup>221</sup> Describing the spectacle he sees, of a national dance in the arena, List calls it:

the light that scintillates in the sequins and in the bright eyes moistened with enthusiasm and fervor, and the good *patria* (fatherland) of workers, which after the daily fatigues, whiles away the hours with the exalted passion of their music and the performance of their dance.<sup>222</sup>

List reads the Stadium as much more than a location for entertainment or athletics; for him it represents a symbol of everything that is modern, human, and revolutionary. “Such the emotion of the stadium,” he writes, “the emotion that makes us dream that we have begun a combative and audacious era, upon which shall rise up, conquering by the trained force of their muscles and the healthy intensity of their spirit, a youth full of zeal and virtue” (8).<sup>223</sup> List moves into his peroration by reading the two arms of the horseshoe-

<sup>219</sup> “Sobre las gradas de la gigantesca herradura de cemento armado, sesenta mil personas se estremecen impacientes...”

<sup>220</sup> “un pueblo que se renueva en cuerpo y alma...”

<sup>221</sup> “Bajo el oro del sol que ilustra el momento, teniendo como fondo el horizonte audaz, y arriba la amplitud de un cielo donde los aeroplanos cantan la victoria del esfuerzo humano...”

<sup>222</sup> “la luz que se irisa en las lentejuelas y en los ojos iluminados que se humedecen de entusiasmo y de fervor, la patria Buena de trabajadores que después de las diarias fatigas, entretiene las horas con exaltada passion de su musica y la interpretación de su danza.”

<sup>223</sup> “Tal la emoción del estadio, la emoción que hace sonar en que se inicia una era combativa y audaz, sobre la que se levantará conquistadora por la fuerza adiestrada de sus músculos y la sana intención de su espíritu, una juventud completa de anhelo y de virtud.”

shaped stadium as “two arms that stretch out in a cordial call to the future” (8).<sup>224</sup> List here imitates Whitman in humanizing the city, just as the US poet had imagined the “gray stones of interminable pavements,” touching his speaker, seeking to “impart” to him some trace of “the living and the dead” (“Song of the Open Road” 299). “Raise up a stadium,” List declaims, “as if you were raising an altar for a better and more fertile life of men, good and strong” (8).<sup>225</sup> Here, the Xalapa stadium becomes the intersection of modernization and a utopian people’s future: a Mexican nation both modernized and human, solid and sound, like the concrete of which the stadium was built. Here is the Stridentist city: freed from the alienating darkness of a dehumanized modernity. It is a massive modern structure that, rather than dwarfing and minimizing the human subject, elevates the human race, ennobling it and enabling it to work, to organize, and to create a future for Mexico.

#### **Afterword: Whitman, Weston, and**

#### **“This Kind of Industrial Scene”**

In 1941, almost fifty years after his death, Walt Whitman was on the open road again. Only this time, Old Walt was a tan Ford automobile, purchased by photographer Edward Weston and christened “Walt, the Good Gray Bard.” Weston and his wife Charis were headed east from California on a cross-country trip to shoot photographs for an illustrated edition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* for the Limited Editions Club, a series of expensive editions of major literary works, illustrated by important artists. By day, Weston and his wife worked or drove; by night they camped or stayed with friends, and

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<sup>224</sup> “como dos brazos que se tienden en llamada cordial para el futuro...”

<sup>225</sup> “Levantad un estadio, como si levantárais el altar para una vida mayor y más fecunda de hombres buenos y fuertes.”

would often read aloud from Whitman's poetry until they fell asleep. Weston would take more than seven hundred photographs on this project, including vast American landscapes, farms, workers, towns, portraits, churches, and anything else that caught his eye for the unusual. But prominent among these American images are Weston's striking photographs of the monumental, artificial forms of US industrial and urban sites: the concrete curves of the Boulder Dam, the smokestacks of Ohio's ARMCO<sup>226</sup> steel plant, the huge spherical tanks at Gulf Oil in Port Arthur, Texas, or the massive skyscrapers of New York City.

These kinds of pictures upset the temperamental editor of the project, George Macy, whose vision of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, like his vision of Whitman's America, seems to have been much more bucolic than Weston's. In the memoir of her years with Edward, Charis Wilson, then Charis Weston, describes how the photos of the Gulf Oil refineries "would make Macy fume with anxiety when he learned about it—what did this kind of industrial scene have to do with the Good Gray Bard?" (253). The difficulty Macy had with imagining a Whitman of the oil refineries and steel plants suggests a certain selective vision in early twentieth-century readings of Whitman. Indeed, critics like the New Humanist Norman Foerster had contributed to representations of Whitman as one of the "mystical poets of nature...," and some readers, perhaps fooled by the pastoral title of Whitman's book, still perceived it—and him—that way (736).<sup>227</sup>

But if an urban-industrial Whitman was considered out of place, so was an urban-

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<sup>226</sup> Acronym for The American Rolling Mill Company.

<sup>227</sup> In his 1916 article in *PMLA* "Whitman as a Poet of Nature," Foerster plants Whitman firmly in the camp of the Romantics, for his sensuous love of the natural world.

industrial Weston. Critics of Weston have noticed in the *Leaves of Grass* project an unexpected return to urban-industrial imagery, an aesthetic Weston had flirted with in the early 1920s, under the influence of artists like Alfred Stieglitz and Charles Sheeler, but which he had virtually abandoned until the Whitman project. Susan Danly writes, “Perhaps the biggest departure in terms of landscape imagery on the Whitman trip was Weston’s new-found interest in urban views,” including “railroad yards, iron bridges, and factories...” (66). In the Whitman project, Danly writes, Weston “found a new appreciation for the industry and architecture of American cities. And he balanced his views of America’s ancient natural wonders, such as the Grand Canyon, with scenes of newly-constructed wonders that harnessed the power of nature, such as the Boulder Dam and the oil refineries of Port Arthur” (78). Alan Trachtenberg likewise sees in Weston’s photographs for *Leaves of Grass* what he calls “a widening of horizons, a more inclusive field for representation than we see in Weston’s earlier work,” and like Danly notes “the larger number of city views and industrial forms” (106).

Now, Whitman’s all-embracing poetry certainly does celebrate urban-industrial progress of his day, as he sings in one poem of the “Populous cities, the latest inventions, the steamers on the rivers, the railroads...” (“Song of the Redwood-Tree” 354). But like his editor George Macy, might be tempted to ask Weston ourselves, “What does this kind of industrial scene have to do with the Good Gray Bard?” I argue that we can better understand the Weston *Leaves of Grass* project in light of Weston’s little-studied connection to *Estridentismo*. Between 1923 and 1926, Weston had lived and traveled in Mexico, shooting studies of indigenous art, Mexican folk life, and some of his famous nudes. Plugged into the modern art scene in Mexico, Weston exhibited his photographs at

a show organized by the *Estridentistas*, had his photographs published in two of their magazines, and became lifelong friends with the French-born Jean Charlot, one of the movement's talented visual artists. In the *Leaves of Grass* project, then, perhaps Weston returns to an urban-industrial take on Whitman shared by *Estridentismo*; furthermore, I argue that Weston and the Stridentists both gravitate towards Whitman's urban-industrial aesthetic out of a desire to strengthen their national culture in a time of crisis.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1924, when *Estridentismo* was still at its apogee, Edward Weston was being featured in a Stridentist exhibit at the so-called “Café de Nadie” or the “Café of Nobody” in Mexico City. In his *Daybook*, Weston wrote “Today, in El Café de Nadie, Avenida Jalisco, I am showing six photographs under the auspices of Movimiento Estridentista....the exhibit is in the charge of Maples Arce, editor of *Irradiador*” (I.63) It was in this short-lived journal, *Irradiador* (“Spotlight” or “That which radiates”) that Maples Arce had also published Weston’s earlier industrial photograph of the smokestacks at ARMCO Steel, on the cover of the November 1923 issue (Figure E). On the back, an advertisement for cigarettes further reinforces the Stridentist aesthetic, depicting a skyscraper, a locomotive, and suspended cables. In May of 1926, the Stridentist periodical *Horizonte* published another industrial photograph by Weston, filling the entire first page of the issue (Figure F). It is striking that the Stridentists seized upon Weston’s industrial photography, even though much of his work in Mexico was a far cry from the aesthetic that would so outrage his future editor on the *Leaves of Grass* project. But even if Weston had temporarily abandoned this industrial subject, the Stridentists, seeking to strengthen and modernize a national culture still in crisis after the

Revolution, seemed to zero in on the industrial side of Weston, just as they did on the industrial side of Whitman.

Weston left Mexico in December of 1926 a changed man. Amy Conger writes that it was in Mexico that Weston was finally free to “dedicat[e] himself to self-expression” (74). It would, perhaps, strengthen his resolve to take exactly the pictures he wanted for the later *Leaves of Grass* project. When he was asked by the Limited Editions Club to do the Whitman book, he looked forward to having, as he wrote in a letter, “great freedom—I can use anything from an airplane to a longshoreman,” and said optimistically that “I can and will do the best work of my life. Of course I will never please everyone with *my* America—wouldn’t try to” (qtd. Trachtenberg 105). And so, driving “Walt, the Good Gray Bard” across the country, Edward and Charis Weston set out to capture what Weston described as “Whitman’s vision of America” (qtd. Trachtenberg 105).

Their very first stop was, interestingly enough, the Boulder Dam, later known as the Hoover Dam. As Charis recalls in her memoir, “Public and industrial installations proved to be among our favorite picture-making sites on the trip; both of us were drawn to monumental human works, and we would have visited more had it not been for wartime restrictions” (237). Indeed, the pending war almost prevented their shooting the Texas Gulf Oil plant photographs, since in 1941 access to some factory and industrial sites was extremely limited for national security. But the Gulf Oil site was for Weston, according to Charis “...his idea of a great place to photograph for an American book” (253). She recalls, “We plunged into the forest of shiny industrial structures that made up an oil refinery. The towers and tanks that lined the docks were striking, unfamiliar forms.

When we came to an avenue of spherical tanks of shiny aluminum, supported by brick posts and capped by winding staircases, Edward was beside himself" (251-252).

Whitman's willingness to write a poetry that included the urban-industrial realities of modern life had paved the way for the avant-garde work of the Stridentists and of Weston, both in poetry and in the visual arts. Whitman himself signaled this radical aesthetic change in the poem he wrote for the 1871 National Industrial Exposition in New York. In what he would later title "Song of the Exposition," Whitman's speaker summons the muse from the Old World, away from her old themes, to sing the industry, inventions, and labors of America. To sing amidst the "thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle" of America's "continual workshops, foundries," its "steam-power, the great express lines, gas, petroleum, / These triumphs of our time..." (343, 349, 347). "I raise a voice," Whitman wrote, "for far superber themes of poets and for art, / to exalt the present and the real..." (347).

But what drew Weston so strongly to the urban-industrial images of the United States? Susan Danly argues, "It is perhaps the sense of nationalism associated with industrial achievement that links Weston's photographs of refineries, steelworks, and power-generating structures with Whitman's poetry" (69). Perhaps no image in Weston's *Leaves of Grass* better captures this aesthetic of American power than his photograph of the newly-completed Rockefeller Center in mid-town Manhattan (Figure G). Taken in 1941, the image captures New York's cityscape, dominated by the Rockefeller skyscrapers. The limestone construction, joined with the Art Deco architectural design, communicates both monumental stability and modernity. In the lower left corner, the steeples of St. Patrick's Cathedral shrink by comparison with the massive structure. The

sheer, dizzying vertical lines of the skyscrapers direct the viewer's eyes upwards, while the seventy-floor RCA building in the background extends out of the frame and suggests both inexpressible size and the promise of something more. Edward and Charis selected two lines from Whitman's poem "Rise O Days From Your Fathomless Deeps" to accompany the photo: "Thunder on! Stride on, Democracy! Strike with vengeful stroke! / And do you rise higher than ever yet, O days, O cities!" (428). The poem comes from Whitman's "Drum-Taps" cluster of poems about the Civil War, and it is perhaps no accident that they paired this image of urban US power with patriotic verses from Whitman's own wartime America.

Indeed, Charis Wilson saw in Weston on the *Leaves of Grass* project a "relatively newfound patriotism" (241). "During World War I he had been a radical," she writes, "but between the wars this changed, partly because of his experiences in Mexico, from which he returned a patriot, a believer in his own country, ready to appreciate the creative side of an expansive culture" (241). In 1941, with his "newfound patriotism," Weston, like the Stridentists, was facing a terrible national crisis. Just as Maples Arce and his group witnessed Mexico's post-revolutionary struggles for peace, prosperity, and modernity, Weston watched with anxiety as his nation geared up to fight fascism in Europe and Asia. For both Weston and the Stridentists, then, Whitman's poetry offered strength, confidence, a song of energy and industry that could shore up and solidify a nation and a people at a crossroads. Perhaps Weston and the Stridentists had learned a great deal from each other: Weston's photography showed the Stridentists the strange, ethereal beauty that lay in the hard lines and unearthly shapes of the industry and the urbe, and the Stridentists had dramatized for Weston the national power offered by that

beauty. And in turn, Weston's US, like the Stridentists' Mexico, could rise to face the perpetual challenges of modernity, celebrating—and realizing—the promises of what Whitman called “the present and the real” (“Song of the Exposition” 347).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “I, TOO, SING AMÉRICA”: THREE LATINO POETS CONFRONTING WHITMAN’S LEGACY

The selection of *Leaves of Grass* for a two-volume luxury edition by George Macy’s Limited Editions Club suggests that by the 1940s, Whitman was comfortably settled on the respectable shelves of the literary canon. The Modernists, while (at times reluctantly) acknowledging their own debt to Whitman, had succeeded him as radicals and experimenters, and were swiftly on their way to becoming the Establishment themselves.<sup>228</sup> Still, Edward Weston had offered a provocative, experimental, twentieth-century use for Whitman’s aesthetics, echoing the appropriations of the Mexican writers with whom he had worked. But after mid-century, Whitman’s free verse, his radical expansion of the proper subject material for poetry, and his American egalitarianism had permeated US poetics. It would take a new generation of innovators and radicals to rediscover the newness of Whitman’s experimental power. In the decades after the 1960s, a new Hispanophone Whitman emerges, an activist Whitman, a force who must be reckoned with, argued with, or recruited for the cause of Civil Rights, for social change, and for a new poetics that better expressed the linguistic and cultural diversity of the US.

Each of the prior chapters has traced the complex ways in which Latin American *vanguardias* appropriated Whitman to forge solutions to the new aesthetic, linguistic, cultural, and political challenges that faced them as artists of modernity. Acknowledging the numerous differences between the *vanguardias* and the Chicano and Latino poets of

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<sup>228</sup> See for instance Ezra Pound’s poem to Whitman, “A Pact.” Pound’s speaker says, “I have detested you long enough,” and admits that “I am old enough now to make friends” (111).

the US,<sup>229</sup> as well as the twenty-year gap between even the tardiest of the *vanguardias* and the 1960s, I argue that these mid-century US-Hispanophone poets take up again the work of the avant-gardes in a new era—combining the same formal and linguistic experimentation, social and political activism, and anti-establishment rebelliousness as the *vanguardista* generation had decades before. Of US Hispanophone relations with Whitman, Kirsten Silva Gruesz astutely describes “a series of discontinuous ruptures and refractions,” rather than “a consistent tradition of Whitman discipleship passing from one generation to the next” (“Walt Whitman, Latino Poet” 153). We can likewise use Gruesz’s assessment to understand the “discontinuous ruptures and refractions” of the avant-gardes within the diverse yet related projects and experiences of US Latino poetry. As *hispanos* in the U.S., these writers also speak from a decidedly modern position of cultural, linguistic, and even geographic displacement. And it is frequently this self-aware position of feeling “out of place” in the U.S., in Anglo-American culture, or in the English language, that drives them to Whitman for the raw material to construct or claim a place, a voice, and a poetry to express their modern selves.

The critical success of US Latino poetry since the Chicano movement offers us a long list of authors from whom to choose in our exploration of their appropriations and circulations of Whitman. Gruesz lists just a few: “from the *caribeños* Martín Espada, Victor Hernández Cruz, and Julia Alvarez to the Chicanos Luis Omar Salinas, Ricardo Sánchez, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Jimmy Santiago Baca, to the Columbian-born pop

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<sup>229</sup> The former are often nationalist, while the latter frequently find themselves struggling between or among cultural identities. The *vanguardias* were usually founded by upper middle-class intellectuals and social elites, while Chicano and Latino poets frequently come from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds—often themselves the first of their families to receive an education.

songstress Shakira" (152). In this chapter, I explore the use of Whitman by the Chicano poet José Montoya, the "pinto" or "prison" poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, and the *Dominicana* immigrant Julia Alvarez. My rationale is as follows. First, these writers represent a historical arc from the founding of the *Movimiento Chicano* (Montoya) in the 1960s, to Baca's early poetry in the 1970s and '80s, to Julia Alvarez's well-earned critical and popular success in the 1990s. Second, in their own ways, these writers represent the distinct but interlocking concerns of Latino poetry, such as bilingualism, Anglo oppression of US Latinos, the immigrant voice, and the validity of minority claims to the rightful literary, cultural, and national "place" for the Latino subject. Third, it is my hope that by sampling unique but influential voices from US Latino writing, a common thread may emerge, tracing the ways Whitman and his project remain useful to these and other experimental minority movements.

Utilizing telephone interviews, biographical criticism, and close readings, this chapter argues that Montoya, Baca, and Alvarez use Whitman first to claim—or to reclaim—a poetic space for themselves as minority writers in the US, and second to write back against the dominant Anglo-US culture that sought to displace them; yet in their own ways, these writers must in some cases confront not only the threat of Whitman's own powerful poetic voice, but also the limitations and contradictions of his "American" project. Still, even as they do so, these US-Hispanophone writers utilize Whitman's inclusive poetic voice to challenge any claim that they are "out of place" in US literature or culture; Whitman, whose canonical status often obscures the radical marginality of his person and his project, becomes for them a speaker and an advocate, a poet of the displaced and the disenfranchised, whose rebellious, experimental power serves as a

means for them to write back to his beloved, but flawed, nation.

### **The Front Lines: *El Movimiento Chicano* and US-Hispanophone Literature**

The United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw an explosion of labor activism and enormous, organized social and cultural activity by Mexican-Americans; these events brought to a head the serious tensions caused by racial inequality and economic injustice ever since the annexation of Mexican territories (and their citizens) by the US in 1848.<sup>230</sup> In California, César Chávez and the United Farm Workers drew national attention by leading a nation-wide boycott of table grapes. Across the US, the growing Chicano movement mobilized into a number of influential activist organizations. In Denver, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales founded the Crusade for Justice; in Texas, José Angel Gutiérrez founded the Mexican-American Youth Organization; the Ford Foundation helped to found the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, a civil rights organization originally based in San Antonio. Candelaria describes how, as the movements consolidated into a cultural front, they began to focus on three primary goals: “(1) to better the group’s socioeconomic condition, (2) to heighten its participation in the political process, and (3) to increase its members’ access to effective education” (10).

But this period also saw what Philip Ortego named the “The Chicano Renaissance” in literature and the arts (qtd. Candelaria 19). In 1965, Luis Valdez founded his activist theater group, El Teatro Campesino [The Farmworker Theater]; in Berkeley in 1967, Chicano professors founded *El Grito* [*The Shout*], a literary and social activist

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<sup>230</sup> In the following summary I rely heavily on Cordelia Candelaria’s *Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction* and Martinez’s and Lomeli’s “Introduction” to *Chicano Literature: A Reference Guide*.

journal; in the following decades, the novel and other prose narratives saw a blossoming as well, and within *El Movimiento Chicano*, poetry took on radical new attributes and a decided prominence. Displaced in the nineteenth century from Mexican lands, and subsequently in the first half of the twentieth century by a still-racist Anglo-American culture, the writers of *Chicanismo* called for a cultural return to the lost mythic homeland of the Aztecs, or Mexica, known as *Aztlán*.<sup>231</sup> A Chicano imaginary began to take shape, as Chicano poetry sought to capture and express a cultural and ethnic identity that was neither Mexican nor US(Anglo)-American, but uniquely Chicano; poets experimented with form and bilingualism, employing the *barrio* slang known as *caló*. Building—as José E. Limón has argued—on the long traditions of Mexican-American folklore and ballads, a socially-engaged Chicano poetry emerged, employing oral, popular, and propagandistic techniques to depict the harsh realities facing Latinos in the US. Subsequent decades would add other themes such as aesthetics, craft, language, gender, and spirituality to the initial activist fervor of early Chicano literature; but Latino poetry in the US has been irrevocably shaped by these early *Movimiento* years, and often retains that spirit of social critique, demanding recognition of natural and political rights, and insisting on the rightful place of the Hispanophone and minority voice in the public sphere of “America.” It is here that we find Walt Whitman once again.

### **“Walt Had *Huevos*” and “Poor Old Walt**

### **Whitman”: José Montoya’s Whitman**

When I interviewed José Montoya in November of 2012, less than a year before he passed away, he made it clear that to him writing poetry was equal parts art and

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<sup>231</sup> As Martínez and Lomelí remind us, “Chicano” comes from a sixteenth-century pronunciation of “Mexica,” pronounced “Me-shee-kah” (xi).

fistfight. In a gravelly voice, Montoya described his career as a Chicano in the US literary establishment as “an ‘Us against them’ kind of thing,” but he added that “at the same time the battle is enticing, the battle is worth...you know, doing battle” (Telephone interview). When I asked him if he felt that he had had to do battle with Whitman, his reply was instant and emphatic. “I have to take him down!” he said loudly: he went on,

You know, you look at your foe, and who are you competing against? Well, you know, T.S. Eliot and all these guys... and so you begin to take them on. And, you know, they kick your ass, you kick their ass, but it was. . . for this Chicano from the barrio it was a good battle, it was a challenge, attempt, an effort. But your heroes became your foes, you know, in a sense. (Telephone interview)

He later added, “So to me, it's exciting to see, and feel *chingón* enough to take on Whitman, 'God damn, José, I mean the *chinga*, man!' Well, I'm going to try. You know, those are the people you're up against. Those are the writers that you're challenging, so step up to the plate, bro” (Telephone interview).

It is this fighting spirit that characterized—and still characterizes—much of US-Hispanophone literature, a spirit that Montoya expressed in the interview, in one of his last comments on Whitman: “Walt had *huevos!*” he said admiringly (Telephone interview). The *machista* praise of Whitman’s *huevos* (literally “eggs,” meaning testicles) evokes a masculinist attitude to life and art that many Chicana and Latina writers have critiqued within the projects of their male counterparts. But there is a sense in which Whitman’s books, so full of “seminal milk” and even—in the case of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*—illustrated with spermatozoa, sought in a very literal way to conceive and impregnate future generations of poets like Montoya (“A Woman Waits for Me” 258; Folsom *Whitman Making Books* 18).<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Indeed, Whitman even seems to have coined the term “man-balls” in the ninth section of “I Sing the

In 1969, *Quinto Sol Publications*, the same Berkeley press responsible for the Chicano literary journal *El Grito*, published the bilingually-titled anthology *El Espejo - The Mirror*. It was the very first anthology of Chicano poetry, and included the young José Montoya's first published poems. Montoya addressed his first poem to Whitman, and titled it "Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman" ["Poor Old Walt Whitman"]. Although the poem does not appear in the revised 1972 edition of the *El Espejo* anthology, when Montoya later published the definitive collection of his poetry, the 1992 *InFormation*, he placed the poem once again at the very beginning. A close reading of Montoya's Whitman poem, and an analysis of the four manuscript drafts of the poem, reveals Montoya not only invoking Whitman's authority to carve out a place for himself in US literature, but also at the same time critiquing Whitman's very vision of the "America" that the *Movimiento Chicano* rejected.

Montoya's grappling with Whitman in his first published poem, and in this central anthology of Chicano poetry, serves the same dual purpose that appropriations often do: invocation and overthrow. Doris Sommer describes this type of trans-cultural appropriative dynamic as an "apparently deferential gesture," a "respectful naming of masters and models, [that] is merely a strategic distancing" (62).<sup>233</sup> But rather than seeking to preserve a "master" author's authority in order to take it for himself, Montoya's Chicano poetics make him "feel *chingón* enough to take on Whitman," and his poem undermines a sympathy for Whitman with a stark attack on Whitman's "America."

"Body Electric" (257). See also Ed Folsom, "'A spirit of my own seminal wet': Spermatozoan Design in Walt Whitman's 1860 *Leaves of Grass*." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73 (2010), 585-600.

<sup>233</sup> In *Foundational Fictions*, Sommer looks at the nineteenth-century Argentine writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's praise of James Fenimore Cooper, which she reads as duplicitous.

Montoya's "Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman" begins:

When the good grey poet  
Imposed his virile image  
Upon an impotent people no  
Envisionó en su locura<sup>234</sup>  
Stoop-shouldered junkies  
Aching to get straight and  
Hip-swinging he-men  
Abrasandose en callejones oscuros.<sup>235</sup> (3)

Montoya's Whitman here is "the good grey poet," whose "virile image" Montoya contrasts with the "impotent people" of the US (3). The aggressive "Imposed" masculinity contrasts, for Montoya, with the helplessness of the "Stoop-shouldered junkies" and the slur of effeminacy aimed at the homosexual "Hip-swinging he-men," twentieth-century outcasts of US society that he feels Whitman's limited vision could not foresee (3). Whitman returns to earth as a Tibetan monk to witness the dystopian world he failed to predict in his life: the reincarnated Whitman is celibate, "un monje solitario" ("a solitary monk"), and "Abhors" the vision of the spiritual wasteland "his third eye / Sees" (3). Even his "dry yak dung fire" is "dying," and "emits such little warmth" (3).

In the second and final stanza of the poem, Montoya's speaker portrays Whitman as doing penance, being purified of his blindness and error:

Y volverá [sic] otra vez, again and again<sup>236</sup>  
Y con cada resurrección he<sup>237</sup>  
Shall shed reluctantly that  
Self adulation which led him,  
Ciego, from the East River<sup>238</sup>

<sup>234</sup> "did not / Envision in his madness..."

<sup>235</sup> "Embracing in dark alleys."

<sup>236</sup> "And he will return again..."

<sup>237</sup> "And with each resurrection..."

<sup>238</sup> "Blind..."

To the singing hills of a  
 Land emasculating itself,  
 Dejando droppings of<sup>239</sup>  
 Asphalt and reinforced concrete. (3)

The poetic speaker remains critical of the Whitman who “did not / Envision” (“no / Envisionó”) America’s future, and who was full of “Self adulation,” while remaining “Ciego” (“Blind”) to the harsh realities of an urbanized “Land emasculating itself, / Dejando droppings of / Asphalt and reinforced concrete” (3).

When I asked Montoya what had moved him to write the “Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman” poem he responded:

Well, you know when, when you put somebody up, and you idolize them and admire them, and they kind of represent what this country’s all about. And then you see what this country has done to me and to my people here in our, here in my time, and, and so you just have to feel a little bit sad, a little bit sorry for the grandeur that he stood for.... (Telephone interview)

It is this disappointment, this sense of disillusionment with Walt Whitman and his “America,” that permeates the poem, just as the critique of societal injustice, institutional prejudice, and the effects of poverty permeate much of Chicano poetry.<sup>240</sup> It is the same “America” that Montoya would satirize in his “Don’t Ever Lose Your Driver’s License,” where

huge, smiling billboards  
 Proclaim a grand America  
 Out there—somewhere—as the  
 Gloom rolls on.... (99)

<sup>239</sup> “Leaving...”

<sup>240</sup> Wolfgang Binder writes that José Montoya and the other Chicano writers of the 1960s “responded to immediate needs of the Chicano movement and the underprivileged and functioned both as political activists and as bardic spokesmen for a people” (XIV). He adds that this commitment has continued for the *Movimiento Chicano*: “Social poetry, protests poetry, remains to date an important base for Chicano literature, just as continuing socio-economic inequity has remained a reality for vast sections of Chicano society” (XV).

Montoya, then, sees the risk that the American dream will be an empty promise: “a grand America / Out there—somewhere—” but never realized (99).

Montoya’s condemnation of the failure of US culture is clear in the manuscript drafts of the poem that would become “Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman,” but his early versions initially portray Whitman as offering a failed solution to the problems of the US, whereas the final version depicts Whitman as ignorant of, and perhaps even complicit in, the failure of American society. Montoya’s first undated typewritten draft, corrected in pencil, invokes Whitman as “the good gray poet,” trying in fact to prevent the coming failure of his “people” (First Draft):

When the good grey poet  
Imposed his verile [sic] image  
Upon an impotent people  
He envisioned [sic] in his madness  
Stoop-shouldered junkies  
Aching to get straight  
and hip swinging he-men  
holding hands in dark alleys. (First Draft)

Here, rather than a naïve poet blind to the flaws of his national culture, Montoya fashions Whitman as a masculinist (“verile”) prophet, foreseeing an “impotent” future of drugs and back-alley homosexual encounters (First Draft). Here there is an implied causal relationship between the “impotent” future “envisioned” [sic] by Montoya’s Whitman and the imposition of his masculinist “verile image,” as if for Montoya, Whitman’s forceful, manly poetics might prevent it from becoming real.

It is extremely unlikely that Montoya’s “envisioned” is the verb form of the obscure seventeenth-century noun meaning “blindness,” especially since he changes it in the third draft to the false-cognate Spanish “Envisionó,” from the English “Envisioned” (First Draft; Third Draft). But the theme of sight and blindness about the future of

America already haunts the drafts of the poems, since Whitman envisions—and seeks to prevent—the dark future, and the “solitary / Monk / ABHORS THE SIGHT HIS / THIRD EYE SEES” (First Draft). In the second draft, Montoya escalates the homosexual imagery with the “hip-swinging he-men embracing / In dark alleys...” (Second Draft). It is here that Montoya begins to introduce the idea of Whitman’s blindness to American realities, since, just as in the final version of the poem, the reincarnated monk Whitman goes “Blindly from the East River,” but in this draft he goes “To the singing hills of a / Phoney land emasculating / Itself...” (Second Draft).

It is not until the fourth draft, dated 1963, that Montoya blames Whitman for *not* foreseeing what the US would become. In this final typewritten draft, Montoya’s Whitman “no / Envisionó” (“did not / Envision”) the “junkies / aching to get straight” or the gay men “Abrasándose en callejones oscuros” (Fourth Draft). As such, Montoya’s Whitman, over the course of these drafts, shifts from trying to *stop* the coming “emasculating” of America with his “verile” [sic] verse, to a blind—and perhaps culpable—ignorance of the logical conclusions of his American ideal. In the poem, it is Whitman’s “Self adulation” which makes him “Ciego” (“blind”) to the fact that his land is “emasculating itself, / Dejando droppings of / Asphalt and reinforced concrete” (Fourth Draft). In fact, in one reading of the poem, it might be the “Self adulation,” the blind, jingoistic celebration of “America,” that leads to the nation’s darkening and decay. Finally, the syntax of the last stanza leaves the poem ambiguous about whether it is the “Land emasculating itself” or in fact Whitman himself who is “Dejando droppings of / Asphalt and reinforced concrete” (Fourth Draft). If so, it could be that the barren urban wasteland, full of pain and injustice, is itself the “droppings” of the poor blind *viejo*, Walt

Whitman.

We ought not to overlook the fact that Montoya's use of Spanish here represents an avant-garde, experimental act for US poetry in the 1960s. The bilingualism of the poem—and of the Chicano and Latino movements in the mid-twentieth century—certainly evokes the earlier macaronic tendencies of modernist experimenters like Eliot and Pound. But for *Movimiento Chicano* founders like Montoya, Alurista, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, and others, it also meant overturning the aesthetics of a predominantly monolingual "American" poetic canon—a conscious act of linguistic resistance akin to that of the José Coronel's *Vanguardia*. We can see this at work in "Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman," especially given that the drafts show that Montoya wrote the poem in English and then deliberately went back and translated certain words into Spanish; furthermore, the poem lacks any rigid system for which words are Spanish (in the published version of the poem, the Spanish includes nouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and adjectives) suggesting a slang, oral, street-level quality much like the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia*'s project of common-language poetry.<sup>241</sup>

We should note, too, the broader significance of Montoya's poem's bilingualism, and the way in which he introduces the Spanish language into the drafts. It is in the third draft that Whitman's name and the Spanish language first appear in the poem at all, within the now-Spanish title "Pobre Viejo Walt Whitman." Montoya's choice of a Spanish title for the third draft—for a poem whose first two untitled drafts he had written exclusively in English—represents an assertion of a poetic right. In the fully bilingual third and fourth drafts, and in the published version, Montoya's US-Hispanophone voice

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<sup>241</sup> Montoya's most famous poem, "El Louie," amplifies this bilingual, common-language aesthetic with its extensive use of Spanish and *barrio* slang known as Caló.

claims the right to address the American Bard in Spanish, even from within the boundaries and cultures of the United States. Although countless foreign Spanish-language voices since José Martí had conversed with Whitman across the Americas, in 1963 Chicano poetry asserts its own Hispanophone response to Whitman, in a poetry not foreign but integral to US literature.

Whitman himself, as we have seen in his “Primer of Words” and other writings, envisioned an American language that was as linguistically rich and diverse as its multi-ethnic inhabitants. Although he admitted to Traubel, “I know no language but my own,” in his writings Whitman routinely—if limitedly—used French, Spanish, and even the Sanskrit word, “maya,” which he translates as “illusion” (*With Walt Whitman* 1.119; “Are You The New Person” 277).<sup>242</sup> Whitman’s selective use of Spanish words like *libertad*, *Americanos*, and *camerado* suggest the transnational nature of Whitman’s project of “American” liberty and fraternity;<sup>243</sup> but it also suggests—for all his rejection of the Old World language and culture in texts such as his “Primer of Words”—that Whitman still resists English-language nativism of his day by including immigrant words in his American language.

But it was Whitman’s empathy with the marginalized, not his attempts at multilingual poetry that made him attractive to Montoya. When I asked Montoya about what drew him to Whitman, he responded: “I guess it was his depiction, his depiction of

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<sup>242</sup> For a discussion of Whitman’s use of Francophone language, see for instance K. H. Francis’s “Walt Whitman’s French.” For a discussion of Whitman’s use of Spanish over time, see Heidi Kathleen Kim’s “From Language to Empire: Walt Whitman in the Context of Nineteenth-Century Popular Anglo-Saxonism,” especially pages 11-13.

<sup>243</sup> Whitman uses these terms in a number of poems; see for instance, “Starting from Paumanok.” For a discussion of the origins of the word “Camerado,” see Cohen and Price. It makes sense that Whitman would gravitate towards the antiquated masculine ending rather than the common Spanish word, which ends in the feminine *-a*; the masculine form, however uncommon, fits better with Whitman’s vision of adhesiveness and the manly love of comrades.

something that was very . . . very real to me, and that was abject poverty and hardships and working in the fields, and, to me it smacked of an old man who knew what he was talking about" (Telephone interview). So even if Whitman, or Whitman's "America," might be responsible for the injustices and faults of US society, Montoya still saw value in Whitman's poetic representations of the marginalized. It is true that Whitman's radically inclusive verse sang, in his "Song of Myself," of "The opium-eater" who "reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips," "The prostitute" who "draggles her shawl," and "him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder" (Whitman 202, 238). No human being, it seems, was out of place in Whitman's vision of the new America poem.

Indeed, Montoya himself had experienced firsthand both the failure and the success of the American dream. Montoya grew up in New Mexico and California, a third-generation Mexican-American who knew the meaning of poverty and marginalization. As a child he worked picking grapes, and when his parents separated, José continued his education while working to help support his mother and siblings. After serving in the Navy in the 1950s, Montoya received his college degree and teaching certification, with the help of the G.I. Bill and a scholarship. He involved himself in Union affairs and the growing Chicano movement, and became a professor of art education at Sacramento State University; in the early 1970s Montoya formed the Royal Chicano Air Force, an arts and activist group that led boycotts of Safeway in support of its laborers, in full Air Force costumes and a military jeep. In his life and his writing, then, Montoya observed racial discrimination against himself and his fellow Mexican-Americans; he witnessed labor exploitation and the self-destructive violence of gangs and drugs. And he attacked

the “American” structures that he felt perpetuated these evils.

But Whitman’s usefulness to Chicano writers comprises more than the concerns of labor activism or social justice. When I asked Montoya about Whitman’s importance to the Chicano poetry movement, he spoke thoughtfully, working out his response as if it were one of his poems:

I think if Chicanos like myself and Alurista, and others, Ana Castillo, and the poets—the Chicano poets—if they’re true to what they do, they may dislike the hell out of the T.S. Eliots and the Walt Whitmans, and the *gabacho* poets. But they, they were founder guys, they were forgers. They worked in the foundry and pounded words until they made sense. You can’t put that aside, man. You gotta deal with it. (Telephone interview)

Montoya’s praise of Whitman’s poetic and linguistic craft, the “forging” of words in the “foundry,” echoes Montoya’s own notion of poetry as “word forging,” as he describes it in his acknowledgements for *InFormation: 20 Years of Joda* (VII). “So to me,” Montoya said of writing his poems, “the music of the language, it’s gotta be authentic, you know. And you don’t clean it up or pretty it up, you just announce it, you say it, you, you talk it, you know? (Telephone interview).

To “announce” your poems, as Montoya put it here, is a very Whitmanian term. In his poem “So Long!,” Whitman’s speaker says “I announce natural persons to arise, / I announce justice triumphant, / I announce uncompromising liberty and equality, / I announce the justification of candor and the justification of pride” (610).<sup>244</sup> Montoya himself, and the members of the *Movimiento Chicano*, could strongly sympathize with a poetic vision of “justice triumphant,” of “liberty and equality,” and “candor” and “pride”—all the more from marginalized voices like their own (610). Speaking of Whitman, Montoya describes his own

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<sup>244</sup> In his poem “As I Walk These Broad Majestic Days,” Whitman also writes, “And our visions, the visions of poets, the most solid announcements of any” (596).

admiration or an adulation for somebody who could put down the kind of writing that he did, and here, he might have been a homosexual. Who knows, you know? But that just helped me to figure and understand that the word and writing and poetry and literature and all that comes from whoever is dying to put it down.... It's whatever, but you gotta say it, you gotta sing it, you gotta, you gotta yell it out. (Telephone interview)

For Montoya then, it is Whitman's ability to "announce" a poetry for all peoples, even from his own position of marginality, that in turn inspires Montoya to "yell it out" for the marginalized Chicanos of the US (Whitman "So Long!" 610; Montoya Telephone interview).

### **"Through Language I Became the Grass":**

#### **Jimmy Santiago Baca's Whitman**

In our interview, José Montoya made another revelation about the powerful role of poetry and language in his life. Describing how he and other Chicano poets rose above troubled and marginalized childhoods, Montoya said: "But, the thing that kept us going, the thing that saved our ass was the language, and the ability to sing with your language. That was the saving grace for a lot of us, who were destined to probably die in the streets. . . because that's all there was, that's all there was. . ." (Telephone interview). Few poets exemplify this better than Jimmy Santiago Baca. Of Chicano and Native American descent, Baca was born in New Mexico in 1952 to a troubled, impoverished family; he lived in an orphanage when his parents left him, and in 1973 he went to prison in Arizona for drug offences. There, amidst the brutality, violence, and despair of prison life, Baca taught himself to read and write. When I interviewed Baca in January of 2014, I asked him about the first time he read Whitman's work. He replied, "I think I read it in 1979, since 1978, when I was doing time in prison. I think somebody somewhere gave me a book of his. And I immediately loved it. It was good stuff" (Telephone interview). In

prison, he also encountered the poetry of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and the Chilean Pablo Neruda. As he describes it in his 2001 memoir *A Place to Stand*, this newfound power to read and write began a radical process of transformation and redemption in his life: “Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me” (5).

In his 1992 book of memoirs and essays, *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*, Baca describes—with imagery evocative of Whitman—the moment he became a poet:

I was born a poet one noon, gazing at weeds and creosoted grass at the base of a telephone pole outside my grilled cell window. The words I wrote then sailed me out of myself, and I was transported and metamorphosed into the images they made. From the dirty brown blades of grass came bolts of electrical light that jolted loose my old self; through the top of my head that self was released and reshaped in the clump of scrawny grass. Through language I became the grass, speaking its language and feeling its green feelings and black root sensations. Earth was my mother and I bathed in sunshine. Minuscule speckles of sunlight passed through my green skin and metabolized in my blood. (11)

As Baca retells it here, it is a *Leaves of Grass* moment, a “Song of Myself” moment. Whitman’s speaker could “lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass,” but Baca contemplates the “dirty brown blades of grass” outside his prison cell window (Whitman “Song of Myself” 188; Baca *Working* 11). At the end of “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s speaker says, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love...” (“Song of Myself” 247). So also Baca describes, “I became the grass.... Minuscule speckles of sunlight passed through my green skin and metabolized in my blood” (*Working* 11). Whitman’s speaker infuses his matter into nature, where even after death he can be renewed and “grow” (“Song of Myself” 247). Baca’s speaker likewise experiences this moment as a rebirth of self: the grass he sees “jolted loose my old self,”

which is in turn “released and reshaped in the clump of scrawny grass” (11).

The theme of rebirth and renewal permeates one of Baca’s early poems, his “A Song of Survival.” Written in prison, the long poem bears the marks of “Song of Myself,” from Baca’s early reading of Whitman’s work in his cell. Like “Song of Myself,” “A Song of Survival” is a first-person celebration of the self and the world; it traces history in the Americas; it sees the spiritual reality undergirding all of matter; it celebrates harmony with nature and sings of hope and life, even in the face of darkness and violence. Both poems begin with the word “I,” setting the stage for a very active first-person poetic persona. Baca begins a long passage describing his many different occupations: “I worked as a licensed plumber, had my own tools / and truck, every morning met the sun, felt my muscles / pull against each other, working the pipe-wrenches and shovels” (63). Like Whitman, who admires the “lithe sheer of their waists” and the “massive arms” of the hammering blacksmiths, Baca’s speaker celebrates the dignity of labor and the beauty of the body (“Song of Myself” 198):

and I worked in Mexico as a rock-breaker, high on  
the mountain, stood in the midday sunlight,  
shirtless, my chest shimmering in perspiration, as I  
brought the big hammer down on huge rocks.... (“A Song of Survival”  
63)

The long, loving description of Baca’s speaker’s jobs gathers speed into a Whitmanian catalog: “a chain-puller, a soda-jerk, a shoe salesman, refrigeration mechanic, gardener, horse trainer, appliance man, painter” (65). Just as the speaker in “Song of Myself” proclaims, “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,” so Baca’s speaker searches “for something to define my / heart with the world into one, using my body and / mind and soul, into one” (Whitman 207; Baca “A Song of Survival” 66).

But the speaker instead finds himself in “my first cell in prison” (66). Contrasted with the freedom, independence, beauty, and dignity of his prior labors, the prison cell threatens to destroy the speaker’s life:

to hands no longer feeling tools, or dirt and bread  
in toolboxes, to legs that no longer climb  
or walk long distances . . . no longer, but  
shortened to a five by nine cell, my whole life  
stuffed into this cell.... (66).

Since he has lost the world because of his incarceration, he must be a world unto himself: “Here within these walls, you become the world...” (68). Discovering the world within himself, he describes another brief Whitmanian catalog: “air, water, dogs, supper, these elements / drove like Springs across your eyes...” (69). Whitman’s loving, attentive appreciation for the small innumerable things of the world teach Baca’s speaker to preserve himself while in the relative sensory deprivation and isolation of prison.

In his poems, Whitman can “celebrate” himself, and thus he offers others that same possibility, even if they find themselves utterly discarded by society (“Song of Myself” 188). Baca’s speaker states that he may “die so young, unmourned, uncelebrated except by / me” (“A Song of Survival” 68). Baca’s speaker further describes how the prison system fails to recognize the dignity and beauty of the human body, a dignity he recognizes in himself:

.... each single  
pore and slab of muscle, each hair,  
my lips, my lashes, my fingers, toes, step—  
all became useless, unadmired, confined,  
ridiculed by these monsters of an unmerciful justice.... (70)

But then he has a moment of cosmic awakening: “Then came morning, daybreak, dawn,” and “it came for me, from me to me, a world, / a life time, many life times, compressed

into one / hour of enlightenment..." (70). Here, Baca splits the word "lifetime" to include all of "life" and all of "time," and goes on to ask, "What does it mean, this passage of time..." (70).

In this "hour of enlightenment," Baca's speaker experiences a cosmic vision of the memories permeating and adhering to the material of his surroundings:

The mortar of these callous walls, what fingers  
mixed it? From where was sand taken? From  
places where Indians made their fires,  
holy fires, where buffalos clouded the land,  
where trappers and pioneer families stepped,  
where newly freed slaves tramped, where holy  
dancers hummed on heated dust.... (71)

He sees the vast history of the space he now inhabits in his cell:

Someone knelt here a million years ago and let  
the sand sift through real fingers, and  
with thousands of years, came someone  
who thought of building a home, a town, perhaps  
a city, the best city in the world.... (71)

He watches its development as "a million sparks / generated by the clash of swords—subsided / in the abundance of land, wheat and beans," while "arid steel plows [are] sweeping the rugged land / to a smooth, polished and baffling prosperity..." (71).

Whitman, too, dwelt in awe on the vast historical processes and legacy lying behind the present moment in his poem "To-day and Thee." In it, his speaker marvels that "[t]he course of Time and nations," as well as "[t]he past entire" are "[g]arner'd for now and thee—To think of it! / The heirdom all converged in thee!" (616). Like Whitman's, Baca's speaker ultimately finds his hope and consolation in the material and spiritual continuity between the past and present; speaking to the cell wall, he says, "O Great Wall, you remain / the sand my grandfather's grandfather touched / to determine

the passage of the hunt..." (72). He continues:

You, O Great Wall, are not my enemy!  
 Here the men scrawl their last hopes on you,  
 as did their fathers' fathers' fathers,  
 journeying into unknown territory.... (72)

He promises to break down the wall, to return it to its elemental, pristine state, "with my words, / disintegrate you into the wilderness you are..." (73). "[F]or when I pace my cell, I pace on dust," he writes, "when I feel you with my hand, I feel the strum of / water, I see gold nuggets and flowers, scratches / of those who passed through here (73-74). "And from dust blessed by many hands," Baca's speaker promises, "I retrieve / their ancient dreams of a good life, / a good future and healthy children..." (74).

What Baca says about Whitman's poetry in our interview reveals the aesthetic underpinnings of his own intimately local yet cosmic, earthy yet mystical "A Song of Survival." Baca praises Whitman's ability "to reconstruct history through verse," and says, "I think Whitman's poetry affirmed for me, this amazing indulgence in life, the spiritual indulgence in life. He didn't separate the spirit from the physical plane. He...what he did was honor both of them" (Telephone interview). Baca further praises Whitman and the Transcendentalists for this awareness, contrasting it with the destruction of US westward expansion:

There was a small school of people who were, in different ways, in philosophy, and in the shorter poem, were acknowledging the spirit in nature. But really, strangely enough, the broader citizenry of America were out destroying it from toe to the top of the head, they were destroying everything they came in touch with, at the same time that the poets and the philosophers were acclaiming the presence of spirit in nature and in indigenous peoples.... (Telephone interview).

When I asked him specifically about the relationship between Whitman's "Song of Myself" and his own "A Song of Survival," he responded:

I was trying out his form. I was trying to see how I could utilize his form or his structure. It was a practice in my development as a poet. I wanted to try the long line, and it verged on the epistolary form. I think Whitman's work comes very close to writing a letter, to . . . a letter to America. It could really be *Letters to America* instead of *Leaves of Grass*. (Telephone interview)

Yet even as his early poetry experiments with the free verse, long lines, and catalogues of Whitman's "form" and "structure," Baca still, like Montoya, finds much to criticize in Whitman's *Letters to America* (Telephone interview). "Interestingly enough, though," Baca said in the interview, "I think his [Whitman's] patriotism blinded his verse in some degree, because, while he celebrated Manifest Destiny, I think he could have done a bit more work on understanding how Manifest Destiny was robbing the rights of the indigenous people to the West of the Mississippi River" (Telephone interview). Baca takes Whitman to task for the fact that "his verse never quite reached that place where the American tableau, the American range in his work, apologized or criticized Americans burning up the houses of Mexicans and hanging the Mexicans from trees, and robbing their land from them..." (Telephone interview).

He does, however, see real, lasting value in Whitman's democratic vision for the US and its literature. In his early reading of Whitman, he says, he "liked especially how he included common everyday life and common everyday people into his poetry" (Telephone interview). He added later, "I like his [Whitman's] democratic spirit, especially coming from a place where I was so oppressed..." (Telephone interview). But even this spirit, Baca feels, may have caused Whitman to overlook the oppressions and injustices of his own day: "in his verse, I think he [Whitman] was so headlong into the celebration of American potential, and a celebration of what Democracy might be, I don't know if he really understood the cost of that Democracy to other people that were here"

(Telephone interview). For Baca, Whitman's vision of who was included in the "American" democracy was in fact narrowed by Whitman's own cultural and historical biases and preconceptions, but it nonetheless remains a democratic vision worth engaging: "I think he left women out. I think he left minorities out. I think he just decried the greatness of the human spirit as it embraced Democracy in this new world. It's a naive perspective, but it's one that works for me, on a lot of different levels, despite its shortcomings" (Telephone interview).

Baca may rightly sense a certain naïveté in Whitman's utopian vision of Democracy, but Whitman's democratic America is, in his writings in *Leaves of Grass* and elsewhere, far more inclusive than perhaps Baca realized. For it is precisely in his treatment of women and minorities that Whitman's vision of democratic equality finds some of its most dramatic and rebellious expressions. In the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was already celebrating "the perfect equality of the female with the male," just as in his later poem, "America," he calls America, "Center of equal daughters, equal sons..." (Preface 1855 8; "America" 616). Likewise, in "I Sing the Body Electric," his speaker admires the human body, saying, "That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect" (251). And this perfect equality of women with men extends for Whitman—quite radically for his time—into the whole of public, civic, and political life. In his *An American Primer*, Whitman writes:

In American city excursions, for military practice, for firing at the target, for all the exercises of health and manhood—why should not women accompany them?—I expect to see the time in Politics, Business, Public Gatherings, Processions, Excitements, when women shall not be divided from men, but shall take their part on the same terms as men. . . . Sometimes I have fancied that only from superior hardy women can rise the future superiorities of These States. (13)

So we can see spelled out here in the *Primer* what Whitman means in his essay “Preface, 1872” from *Specimen Days and Collect*, where he calls the United States “not the man’s nation only, but the woman’s nation” (1001).

Indeed, it is in this same Preface that we also find Whitman’s multicultural and multi-ethnic vision of the US, when he calls for his nation to become a land “of copious races, cheerful, healthy, tolerant, free—to become the most friendly nation, (the United States indeed)—the modern composite nation, formed from all, with room for all, welcoming all immigrants...” (1001). *Leaves of Grass* bears out this embrace of minorities. Whitman’s sympathetic portrayal of slaves in poems such as “Song of Myself” are well-known, but even in 1850, five years prior to the first *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman published his “Song for Certain Congressmen.” This abolitionist poem viciously satirizes pro-slavery and compromise-minded legislators as “docile Dough-Faces.” In the poem, the caricatured pro-slavery “Dough-Face” speaker protests that “moving and bartering nigger slaves” is nothing more than “a trifle” (2). Whitman even signs the poem “Paumanok,” the Native American name for Long Island, taking for himself a pen-name from one oppressed ethnic minority to defend another. As I will discuss toward the conclusion of this chapter, late in his life, Whitman even wrote a piece praising the past and future contributions of Latinos in the US. Although it has its limitations, his picture of the “American” people, like his all-inclusive global catalogue in “Salut au Monde,” works hard to be as exhaustive as it is inclusive: “And you each and everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same!” (“Salut” 295).

**“Rowdy Walt, So Loud and In My Face”:**

**Julia Alvarez’s Whitman**

As a child in the 1960s, Dominicana writer Julia Alvarez experienced firsthand many of what Baca called the “shortcomings” of US culture. Alvarez and her family had fled the ruthless dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, and had moved to New York. There, the exiled Dominican family felt how far United States culture fell short of the American ideal. Alvarez recalled in a 2002 essay:

We arrived in the United States at a time in history that was not very welcoming to people who were different, whose skins were a different color, whose language didn’t sound like English. For the first time in my life I experienced prejudice and playground cruelty. I struggled with a language and a culture I didn’t understand. I was homesick and heartbroken. (“I, Too, Sing América”)

In a 2010 interview, Alvarez further describes her linguistic isolation as a native Spanish speaker: “I knew some classroom English, but I couldn’t follow the quick-paced, idiomatic ‘barbaric yak’ (Whitman’s phrase) of native English speakers. . . . I’d heard we were coming to the home of the brave and the land of the free, but it didn’t feel that way to me” (Ahlander interview). Alienated from her schoolmates by her language and culture, Alvarez turned to books: “What my family had come looking for in the United States, the great democracy, the great freedom and equality, I didn’t find in the United States in the early 60’s in the playground. I found it between the covers of books” (Ahlander interview).

And she especially found it in Walt Whitman’s book. Against a vision of the US as “the melting pot, that old assimilationist, mainstreaming model,” Alvarez found Whitman celebrating an “American” diversity into which she could enter and be herself, without feeling out of place (“I, Too, Sing América”):

And so, it was through the wide open doors of its literature that I truly entered this country. Reading Mr. Walt Whitman, I heard America's promise and I fell in love with my new country. "I hear America singing, its varied carols I hear." As for melting all our variety into one mainstream model, Mr. Whitman disagreed: "I am large, I contain multitudes." This country was a nation of nations, a congregation of races. "I resist anything better than my own diversity." ("I, Too, Sing América")<sup>245</sup>

"Was this *allowed*?" Alvarez continues, "Wasn't this subversive? But Mr. Whitman's poems were printed in my English textbook where he was described as 'the poet of America.' He was saying what this country was really all about" ("I, Too, Sing América). "Although America seemed to have forgotten its promises," she writes, "its writers remembered and reminded us" ("I, Too, Sing América").

But in addition to finding her place in the promising diversity of Whitman's American poetic vision, the young Alvarez also found her English voice in his verse. In her 1991 book, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a semi-autobiographical collection of short stories about an exiled Dominican family adjusting to life in the US, Alvarez represents Whitman's central role in the life of one of the García sisters, Yolanda, or "Yoyo." Through Whitman, Yoyo, whose literary ambitions and voracious reading echo Alvarez's own childhood self, finds her place and voice in the English language and letters:<sup>246</sup>

Back in the Dominican Republic growing up, Yoyo had been a terrible student. No one could ever get her to sit down to a book. But in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language. By high school, the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud

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<sup>245</sup> Here Alvarez also alludes to (and later in the essay fully cites from) Whitman's prose preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, where he calls the United States "not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations" (5). For Whitman, the diversity of the different states provides a strength for the whole national body. For Alvarez, as to a certain extent in Whitman, this strengthening structure of political diversity ought to include also the racial and cultural diversity of its citizens.

<sup>246</sup> It is also perhaps no accident that Alvarez chose the nickname "Yoyo," for the character of Yolanda, when the Spanish word for "me" is "yo."

in English class. (Alvarez *García* 141)

When Yoyo is selected to give a speech to her school, she turns to poetry for some inspiration, and finds

Whitman's poems in an old book with an engraved cover her father had picked up in a thrift shop next to his office. *I celebrate myself and sing myself....He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.* The poet's words shocked and thrilled her. She had gotten used to the nuns, a literature of appropriate sentiments, poems with a message, expurgated texts. But here was a flesh and blood man, belching and laughing and sweating in poems. *Who touches this book touches a man.* (142-143)

With Whitman's words ringing in her ears, she writes her speech: "When Yoyo was done, she read over her words, and her eyes filled. She finally sounded like herself in English!" (143). Here it is Whitman's poetry that helps Yoyo find that voice that "finally sounded like herself" in her new tongue (143).

But for Alvarez, Whitman's voice, the same voice that had first given her the power to sound "like herself in English," promised ultimately to be a threat to her own poetic voice—not the least because of its highly gendered poetic (Alvarez *García* 143). Much later, Alvarez wrote of this simultaneous debt to, and struggle against, Whitman's voice in "Passing On," a poem from her 2004 book *The Woman I Kept to Myself*. "Emily [Dickinson] in one hand, Walt in the other," the speaker begins, "that's how I learned my craft, struggling / to navigate my own way between them..." (139). "I've had an odyssey with both along," the poem continues,

Emily with her slant sense of directions;  
and rowdy Walt, so loud and in my face,  
I've had to stuff his mouth with leaves of grass  
at times to hear my own song of myself! (139)

Here Whitman's aggressive presence is simultaneously "in my face" and *in my face*,

literally present inside the face of the speaker, looking out from her eyes, a loud spirit possessing the unwilling poet and shouting her down from within her own voice. The voice of “rowdy Walt,” it seems, threatens to drown out the speaker’s “own song of myself” (139).

In her 1998 memoir/essay “Of Maids and Other Muses,” Alvarez describes her struggle to claim her own voice as a poet in the years after completing her Master in Fine Arts in creative writing:

This discovery of a voice did not come easily. I was in school before women’s studies or multicultural studies or anything but the CANON became the norm. We read the great writers, Yeats, Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Whitman, with a sprinkling of female exceptions. I do not regret having had these models. They taught me my craft; they forced me to go outside my own experience and background. But it was difficult to find or trust my own voice using only these male models. (159-160)

On fellowship at the writers colony at Yaddo, she sits at her desk, “trying to write something important and coming up with nothing” (161): “I was trying,” she recalls, “to pitch my voice to ‘Turning and turning in the widening gyre,’ or, ‘Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree,’ or, ‘Sing in me Muse, and through me tell the story’” (“Of Maids” 160). “I was tuning my voice to these men’s voices,” she continues, “because I thought that was the way I had to sound if I wanted to be a writer. After all, the writers I read and admired sounded like that” (160). But rather than the masculine voices of the “canonical” poets she admired, her own voice was “the voice of a woman, sitting in her kitchen, gossiping with a friend over a cup of coffee” (“Of Maids” 160).

Unable to write during assigned writing hours, Alvarez sneaks out to socialize with the housekeeping staff in the Yaddo mansion’s kitchen. It is there that she

encounters the domestic materials and metaphors that inspire her accomplished first book, *Homecoming*: “Cup, spoon, ladle, pot, kettle, / grater and peeler / colander, corer, / waffle iron, small funnel” (“Of Maids” 161). She describes:

A little later I went upstairs to the tower room and wrote down in my journal this beautiful vocabulary of my girlhood. As I wrote, I tapped my foot on the floor to the rhythm of the words. I could see Mami and the aunts with the cook in the kitchen bending their heads over a pot of habichuelas, arguing about what flavor was missing.... (“Of Maids” 161)

Having discovered “my woman’s voice,” Alvarez writes, she knew that “my voice would not be found up in a tower, in those upper reaches or important places, but down in the kitchen among the women who first taught me about service, about passion, about singing as if my life depended on it” (“Of Maids” 162).

So it is that in the poetry of her book *Homecoming*, Alvarez strikes out for independence from the canonical, masculine voices like Whitman’s, voices that made her feel like she “couldn’t hear myself think” (160). Instead, her poetry explores the intimate domestic rituals and chores of her childhood, in poems like “Dusting,” “Hanging the Wash,” or “Making Our Beds”; the collection also delves into the heartbreak and loneliness of relationships, divorce, the experience of mental illness, and the struggles with the notions of femininity that she inherited from her traditional Dominican parents. One of the domestic poems, “The Master Bed,” reveals how she fashions this woman’s housekeeping chore to offer a competing and equally transcendent moment to those of Whitman or Yeats. “Mornings after my father left for work,” the speaker says, “Mother and I made up the master bed” (25). Alvarez populates the domestic space of the bedroom with the kinds of words and details that had drawn her to kitchen utensils: “bottom sheet,” “topsheet and blanket,” “bedspread,” “bedskirt” (25).

The child speaker is curious about the hidden, private sexuality of her parents: “I wanted something shocking / to explain my being conceived of in that carpeted bedroom...” (25). But the erotic permeates the space, albeit too submerged in the domestic objects for the child speaker to observe it. The phallic “black nose” of her father’s “slipper poked out / from under the bedskirt,” and the “long pillow” has “a sultan’s tassel at each end,” with echoes of an exoticized Orient and the *eros* of the harem (25). Even the “nosebleed / on her [mother’s] pillowcase” evokes the stained bed sheets some cultures displayed to prove the bride’s virginity before the marriage (25). “But I found nothing to inspire me—,” Alvarez’s speaker concludes, “only newspapers by his bedside, by hers a glass of warm water” (25). But then the revelation in the last two lines of the poem: “One sunbright morning in a shaft of light / a suspension of dust motes whirled like a primal moment” (25). In the “suspension of dust motes,” in the “shaft of light,” Alvarez’s speaker sees not only her own physical origins—the Christian notion that we were fashioned from the dust, and the first moment of her life at her conception—but also the time-stopping “primal moment” of her dignified parents’ life-giving sexual embrace (25). By refashioning the domestic materials of her—and her mother’s—experiences as women into a meditation on human origins and on the mysterious qualities of human sexuality, Alvarez offers an equal, competing feminine poetic voice to the masculine notion of the “IMPORTANT work” in which she had been formally trained (“Of Maids” 160). But her feminist poetics also includes re-writing those same masculine voices of the “CANON,” and reveals a fascinating moment of appropriation of Whitman’s voice (160).

In the thirty-third sonnet of “33,” the last section of the first edition of

*Homecoming*, Alvarez captures the self-expression she has sought in her poetry. Moving beyond the question of poetic voice, the speaker describes her attempt to find the true self that the voice expresses: “Sometimes the words are so close I am / more who I am when I’m down on paper / than anywhere else....” (“33” 93). The speaker feels “...as if my life were / practicing for the real me,” and describes how in writing “...I become / unbuttoned from the anecdotal and / unnecessary and undressed down / to the figure of the poem, line by line” (“33” 93). She offers the poem as one of encouragement to others: “Those of you, lost and yearning to be free, / who hear these words, take heart from me. / I once was in as many drafts as you” (“33” 93). The speaker concludes by offering the work-and self-in-progress that she is: “But briefly, essentially, here I am . . . / Who touches this poem touches a woman” (“33” 93).

Here Alvarez quotes with one key difference one of Whitman’s “Songs of Parting” poems, titled “So Long!,” in which his speaker states:

Camerado, this is no book,  
Who touches this touches a man,  
(Is it night? are we here together alone?)  
It is I you hold and who holds you,  
I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth. (611)

In this section of the poem, Whitman claims not only a literary immortality but also a very real textual form of intimacy with the reader of his book: “O how your fingers drowse me, / Your breath falls around me like dew, your pulse lulls the tympans of my ears...” (611). Alvarez, rather than silencing or ignoring the forceful presence of “rowdy Walt,” co-opts it, refashioning Whitman’s masculinized poetics to express her own woman’s poetic voice and textual body.

But another poem from her later book, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, reveals the

value she sees in the directness of Whitman's bold voice. In her poem "Direct Address," Alvarez writes:

I love those poems where writers turn to me,  
addressing me as *you*—and though I know  
that thousands upon thousands of readers  
have trod his *Leaves of Grass*, I'm still convinced  
it's me Whitman's instructing when he writes,  
*Look for me under your boot soles.* (137)

Here the "turn" of the writers evokes the turning of pages in the relationship between reader and book (137). She equates Whitman with his book—as Whitman himself did—which is literally "*under your boot soles*" because "thousands upon thousands of readers / have trod" it (137, emphasis in original); and she acknowledges her debt to Whitman, who is personally "instructing" her to seek him (137).

Ultimately for Alvarez, Whitman becomes a part of her, a part of her identity as a writer and as an "American." His voice, his instruction, becomes subsumed into her own poetic voice, not dominant but ever-present. As a one-time (but now bilingual) Spanish-speaker in an English-speaking nation, as immigrant in the US, as a minority writer, as a woman poet in a male-dominated canon, Julia Alvarez stakes a claim to a hybrid voice that is still, yet, and always authentically hers. As she concludes her poem "Passing On," this hybrid voice is her lasting contribution, and thus her poetic immortality. "Such mixtures," she writes, "are my forte after all, / since I prefer the hyphenated voice, / a little of this, a little of that..." (139). Her poetic voice contains "Emily with her slant sense of directions; / and rowdy Walt, so loud and in my face," but it also contains "my tías gossiping while rolling dough, / my mother malaproposing her clichés," and the maids her family used to employ (139): "Gladys intoning her sad boleros," "Milagros with her saucy salsa songs," or "my godmother telling her rosary beads" (139). The poem

concludes:

And now this mix of voices sails out—  
a Tower of Babel crammed in Noah’s ark—  
into the future silences beyond  
where I can go and where those yet unborn  
might read what’s left of me, this voice  
I now pass on, my own, and not my own. (140)

### **Conclusion: “That Composite American**

#### **Identity of the Future”**

On questions of race and minorities, it would be tempting either to hail Whitman as the precursor and paragon of twenty-first century social progressivism or to dismiss him as complicit in the many ideological limitations of his own century. The truth is, as usual, much more complex. Although Montoya and Baca place some blame on Whitman for what they feel was his blindness to racial and social issues, Whitman knew very well that US society, like the “American” language, would always be—as Alvarez put it—a “mix of voices” (140). We get a rare insight into Whitman’s views on the specific question of Latino ethnicity in the US and its territories in his text, “The Spanish Element in Our Nationality.” Whitman wrote this fascinating letter in 1883 and published it in the *Philadelphia Press* on 5 August of that year, after a committee in Santa Fe had invited him to write and deliver a poem at their celebration of the 333<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the city’s settlement by the Spanish.<sup>247</sup> Whitman graciously declined the invitation “with sincere regret,” but offered “a few words off hand” that reveal the importance he placed on the contribution of Hispanophone peoples to his America (“The Spanish Element” 1146).

“We Americans,” Whitman begins, “have yet to really learn our own

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<sup>247</sup> As Chris Wilson notes, it was actually the 334<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish exploration of New Mexico by Coronado (186). The celebration comprised a massive political and cultural spectacle, over the course of forty five days, including reenactments of battles between Spanish settlers and native peoples (186).

antecedents,” and he suspects that these antecedents “will be found ampler than has been supposed, and in widely different sources” (1146). “Thus far,” he continues, we have been “impress’d by New England writers and schoolmasters,” and wrongly imagine “that our United States have been fashion’d from the British Islands only, and essentially form a second England only...” (1146). This, he insists, “is a very great mistake. Many leading traits for our future national personality, and some of the best ones, will certainly prove to have originated from other than British stock” (1146).

In the letter, Whitman sets up a dichotomy between what he calls “seething materialistic and business vortices of the United States, in their present devouring relations,” and the “noblest spiritual, heroic and democratic attributes” (1146, 1147). The former he implicitly identifies with “the British and German,” and the latter are yet to come, and must draw—in part—on other sources, including the “Spanish character” (1146, 1147): “To that composite American identity of the future, Spanish character will supply some of the most needed parts. No stock shows a grander historic retrospect—grander in religiousness and loyalty, or for patriotism, courage, decorum, gravity and honor” (1147). Thus it is that the necessary “counterbalance” to US commercialism will come from another of the races in the US—what he calls in the title “The Spanish Element” (1146).

We might rightly fault Whitman for labeling all the diverse Latino peoples of the US and its North American territories as “Spanish,” but he at least acknowledges the importance of the “aboriginal or Indian population—the Aztec in the South, and many a tribe in the North and West,” suggesting their rightful place in the complexity of “American ethnology, past and to come” (1147). Rejecting the myth of the “vanishing

Indian,” he writes:

I know it seems to be agreed that they must gradually dwindle as time rolls on, and in a few generations more leave only a reminiscence, a blank. But I am not at all clear about that. As America, from its many far-back sources and current supplies, develops, adapts, entwines, faithfully identifies its own—are we to see it cheerfully accepting and using all the contributions of foreign lands from the whole outside globe—and then rejecting the only ones distinctively its own—the autochthonic ones? (1147)

Here Whitman dares to include indigenous peoples as racial contributors to “America,” and goes on to praise “the Spanish stock of our Southwest” for “the splendor and sterling value of its race element” (1147): “Who knows but that element, like the course of some subterranean river, dipping invisibly for a hundred or two years, is now to emerge in broadest flow and permanent action?” (1147).

We are struck by the contradictions within Whitman’s ostensibly progressive gesture toward an inclusion of all Latino peoples in the US. Moving beyond the hint of Latin essentialism—Whitman seems to be referring as much to the discernible qualities of a culture as he is to those of a race—we see the selective nature of Whitman’s historical vision. Not only does he elide the very real contemporary diversity of Latinos in his US (think for instance of the vibrant community of Cuban immigrants in New York during Whitman’s lifetime), but he further misrepresents US Latino culture as having been submerged, “dipping invisibly for a hundred or two years,” when in fact Mexican-Americans had been an active part of the US both before—and especially since—the territorial annexations of the 1840s. Although Whitman’s truly inclusive vision hopes for these racial, ethnic, and cultural forces to reach a position of “broadest flow and permanent action,” his ahistorical view refashions the “vanishing Indian” myth into a vanished Latino narrative, in which these minorities have been silent, invisible, even

absent for “a hundred or two years” (1147).

Still, the boldness and radicality of Whitman’s theory of a racially-composite America should not be overlooked or underestimated. He includes indigenous races in the “Many far-back sources and current supplies” that “America” call on as it “develops, adapts, entwines, faithfully identifies its own...” (1147). He likewise welcomes the prospect of the Spanish “race-element” having “permanent action” in the people and the polity of the US. It is undeniably a far cry from the purging racial vision of someone like the (in)famous John O’Sullivan, coiner of the term “Manifest Destiny,” who in that same 1845 treatise imagined that the annexation of Texas would solve the US’s supposed race problem by draining the African-American race southward into the “mixed and confused blood” of Latin America (5).<sup>248</sup> Rather than the Anglo-Saxonist vision of shunting off racial mixture to other nations and regions, Whitman insists on embracing ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity to forge “that composite American identity of the future” (1147).

#### **Afterword: “Yo Tambien Soy América”**

Alvarez’s article, “I, Too, Sing América” (mentioned above), appears in a 2002 book of essays titled *Writers on America: 15 Reflections*, put out electronically by the US Department of State’s Office of International Information Programs (IIP). The IIP also republished Alvarez’s essay on a different section of their site, but in what is likely merely a typo, the transcribers titled it “I, Too, Sing America,” without the orthographic accent. In many ways, this unintentional slip captures the challenges of Latino identity, language, and writing in the US, since inclusion in US-American-ness has in our national history often required the elision of an accent in more than one sense. It has required, as

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<sup>248</sup> To be fair, O’Sullivan identifies this cultural resistance to racial mixture (or even coexistence) in the US as “prejudices,” but it is hard to read his article (and its proposed solution) as really critical of that bigotry.

Alvarez puts it, conformity to an “assimilationist, mainstreaming model” (“I, Too, Sing América”).

So much of Hispanophone-US literature involves a quest for a place of belonging, a search for a true home in the American space its authors occupy. It is no accident that Alvarez—a *Dominicana* in exile from her home country—titled her first book of poems *Homecoming*; nor is it an accident that Jimmy Santiago Baca called his first book of prison-poetry *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, as he describes his life as an ethnic minority, an exile from US society and an immigrant into the harsh new country of imprisonment. For José Montoya, part of the struggle was to claim a place not just in US culture but in our national poetry: “in the beginning,” he said in our interview, “no one would have thought that guys like this would become renowned poets. . .” (Telephone interview). When I asked him what he had to say to the current generation of Chicano poets, he replied:

Don’t be ashamed of who you are and who your people are. Somehow there’s a stigma or there’s somebody in the news media or whatever, you know, “wetbacks,” so the notion is that there is something very wrong with who we are, and that’s bullshit, man. We are as bright and as brilliant and as well-endowed creatively as any motherfucker in the land. So that’s my thing. The “*Si se puede*” (“Yes you can”) thing is not a joke. It can be done, it can happen. You just gotta want to do it. You gotta want it.  
(Telephone interview)

So it is that Montoya, Baca, and Alvarez, having found their own place and voice in their “America,” call for all “Americans” to be as “at home” as Whitman claims to be in the 1871-72 version of his poem “Me Imperturbe,” where he claims, “I am eternally equal with the best—I am not subordinate” (“Me Imperturbe” 190):

Me toward the Mexican Sea, or in the Mannahatta, or the Tennessee, or far north, or inland,  
A river man, or a man of the woods, or of any farm-life of These States, or

of the coast, or the lakes, or Kanada,  
 Me, wherever my life is lived, O to be self-balanced for contingencies!  
 (“Me Imperturbe” 190)

North or South, Spanish or English, no one should feel out of place in the “America.”

Perhaps that is why Alvarez can describe Whitman elsewhere as “El Señor Whitman, a Latino-sounding fellow...” (“A Life in Books”). Alvarez writes, “I see myself more and more as an American writer, not just in the national but in the hemispheric sense. With my roots in the southern part of the Americas (my stories, my history, my traditions, my Spanish and Caribbean rhythms) and my training and experience and flowering in the northern part of the hemisphere, I am truly an all-American writer” (“I, Too, Sing América”). Alvarez concludes the article with her response to Langston Hughes’ response to Whitman in her poem “I, Too, Sing América”:<sup>249</sup>

I, Too, Sing América.  
 I know it's been said before  
 but not in this voice  
 of the plátano  
 and the mango,  
 marimba y bongo... (“I, Too, Sing América”)

“I'm going to sing America!,” Alvarez writes, “with all América / inside me”:

from the soles  
 of Tierra del Fuego  
 to the thin waist  
 of Chiriquí  
 up the spine of the Mississippi  
 through the heartland  
 of the Yanquis  
 to the great plain face of Canada --  
 all of us  
 singing America,  
 the whole hemispheric  
 familia... (“I, Too, Sing América”)

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<sup>249</sup> In his “I, Too, Sing America,” Hughes responds to Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” and claims for himself an equal place and voice in the American nation and culture.

The speaker calls for singing “the big song / that sings / all America,” and concludes (“I, Too, Sing América”):

So, hit it maestro!  
give us that Latin beat,  
¡Uno-dos-tres!  
One-two-three!  
Ay sí,  
(y bilingually):  
Yo también soy América  
I, too, am America. (“I, Too, Sing América”)

## CONCLUSION

### “A TAPIR GRAZING TRANQUILLY IN BOSTON COMMON”: REREADING THE FAMILIAR WHITMAN

The startled reaction of José Coronel’s US visitor, when he encountered the portrait of Whitman in rural Nicaragua, inspired Coronel with the image of a strange, uncanny Whitman—Whitman as an unfamiliar Central and South American animal in an all-too-familiar Yankee place, “a tapir grazing tranquilly in Boston Common” (*Rápido Tránsito* 27). To US readers, Coronel’s surreal gesture suggests a defamiliarized Whitman, an exotic Walt in our domestic “American” space. But we should recall that even to the highly “Americanized” Coronel, it was in fact the tapir that was familiar, and Boston Common that was foreign. And so the light of Coronel’s vivid simile illuminates both a known and an unknown Whitman, a Whitman both out of place and yet very much at home. In the preceding chapters, I have explored a number of these unfamiliar Whitmans, in the diverse and unexpected Hispanophone appropriations of Whitman across the Americas. Each movement, each experimenter, each politically-engaged artist has offered us a tantalizingly new Walt Whitman, refashioned in his reader’s image. But if we wish to follow the centrifugal fling of Whitman’s writings out into what has clearly become a global multiplicity of readings, appropriations, and translations, we should in turn come back with the centripetal pull.

And so Coronel’s metaphor directs us to look with fresh eyes at the major themes of Whitman’s own work, illuminated by these global encounters: his atomistic materialism, his obsession with language, his vision of modernity, and his notion of an America open to anyone and everyone. This concluding chapter will do just that. Guided

by the very things these Hispanophone artists saw as most compelling, repugnant, or useful in Whitman's writings, we can revise—literally “see again”—our own understanding of what Whitman's work means. We realize that Huidobro, the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia*, the Mexican *Estridentistas*, and the Chicano and Latino poets of the US have all zeroed in on something real, something “solid and sound” in Whitman's canon (“Song of Myself” 206). What does Huidobro reveal to us about Whitman's belief in the possibility of all-encompassing global unity, even in the face of terrible violence? What does the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* illustrate about the latent national and cultural resistance of Whitman's “language experiment,” a resistance that Whitman himself frequently denied? What, for Whitman, does “modernity” mean, that complex reality of which the Stridentists sang? And finally, what did Whitman believe about the voice, contributions, and role of immigrants in the United States? These and other questions arise from these transnational textual encounters, and lead us towards an even clearer picture of the lasting import of his work.

### **Beyond Chapter One: “Every Atom”**

### **and Whitman's Unitive Materialism**

Although he had utilized Whitman's embracing poetics of vision in his 1918 *Ecuatorial*, the Chilean Vicente Huidobro saw this all-encompassing sight as an aesthetic threat in his 1931 *Altazor*; then, in his “Song to the American Soldiers” and “Letters to Uncle Sam,” Huidobro critiqued its political ramifications by warning against the United States' expansive hemispheric gaze. Indeed, the globe-trotting Chilean *vanguardista* had every reason to suspect a gaze that sought to embrace nations, territories, or peoples other than its own: he had witnessed the imperialist project behind both World Wars in Europe,

as well as ongoing US meddling in Latin American affairs closer to home. So why did a vast, embracing, unifying vision—which for Huidobro seemed at best impossible, and at worst menacing—so compel Whitman? What makes it possible for Whitman to imagine a nation, a globe, and a cosmos united in one universal embrace?

The truth is that Whitman did, in fact, imagine “America” as a hemispheric body stretching North and South, incorporating the heterogeneity of the “New World.” He writes in the prose Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that the “American” poet should be able to encompass a growing America: “To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes...” (7). This “American” geography includes, in his catalogue, Canada and Latin America:

The blue breadth over the inland sea of Virginia and Maryland and the sea off Massachusetts and Maine and over Manhattan bay and over Champlain and Erie and over Ontario and Huron and Michigan and Superior, and over the Texan and Mexican and Floridian and Cuban seas and over the seas off California and Oregon.... (7)

He continues, “When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them...” (7).

As Ed Folsom points out, it is tempting to conflate Whitman’s—and our own—use of “America” with “the United States,” but for Whitman the terms are not interchangeable (“What a Filthy Presidentialad” 108-110). To call the US “America,” Whitman told his disciple Horace Traubel, was to exclude the *rest* of America: “Of course there is no difference at all—we all acknowledge it—and yet we go on calling

ourselves exclusively American at somebody else's expense. Why not all American—the Canadian, the Mexican, the Panamanian, the Nicaraguan—what-not!" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 5.379-380). Horace Traubel, in his 1917 *Conservator* article "Walt Whitman's America" recalled Whitman as saying: "I don't want to be tied to the little conclusions of a petty nationalism. America will extend itself as an idea, never I hope in conquest. I'd rather anything should happen to us than that we should add one inch of territory to our domain by conquest" (qtd. Folsom "Presidentiad" 96).

Of course, even Whitman's semantic act of embracing Canada, Mexico, Panama, and Nicaragua under the one umbrella term "America," and insisting that their linguistic, cultural, geographic, and national diversities in fact comprise "no difference at all" still represents precisely the kind of gesture that would have made Huidobro and many Latin American nationalists uncomfortable (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 5.379-380). Indeed, on the geopolitical level, this unitive hemispheric vision has had for the United States and its neighbors—as it did during Whitman's own lifetime—its own destructive imperialist implications. But to understand it properly, we must recognize that for Whitman this vision of national-continental union springs freely and naturally from his notion of interpersonal communion.

Perhaps no poetic cluster in *Leaves of Grass* better expresses Whitman's notion of the relationship between the intimate bonds of interpersonal love and (inter)national unity than the "Calamus" poems. In his "For You O Democracy," Whitman writes:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shown upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long love of comrades. (272)

For Whitman, this “magnetic” and “life-long love” between persons is what unifies the “continent” and ultimately the whole globe (“For You” 272): in another “Calamus” poem, Whitman’s embrace reaches out “[t]o the East and to the West, / To the man of the Seaside State and of Pennsylvania, / To the Kanadian of the north, to the Southerner I love...” (“To the East and to the West” 285). “I believe,” the speaker says, “the main purport of these States is to found a superb friendship,” that “has always been waiting, latent in all men” (285).

This interpersonal communion unites us transnationally, creating a global community—or better put, a global communion—as in Whitman’s poem “This Moment Yearning and Thoughtful.” The speaker finds himself “yearning and thoughtful sitting alone,” but imagines that “there are other men in other lands yearning and thoughtful, / It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany, Italy, France, Spain, / Or far away, in China, or in Russia or Japan, talking other dialects...” (280-281). “And it seems to me,” the speaker continues, “if I could know those men I should become attached to them as I do to men in my own lands, / O I know we should be brethren and lovers, / I know I should be happy with them” (281). It is no accident, surely, that the poem immediately following the “Calamus” cluster in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* is none other than “Salut au Monde.”

Whitman even goes so far as to call the magnetic force of interpersonal love “The Base of All Metaphysics,” as he titles another of his “Calamus” poems. In this poem, the speaker claims to have “studied the new and antique, the Greek and Germanic systems,” as well as Plato, Socrates, and Jesus Christ (275). But he finds that underlying all these metaphysical systems is one law that unites all things: “The dear love of man for his

comrade, the attraction of friend to friend, / Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents, / Of city for city and land for land" (275). Here the bond between two persons becomes the model of all familial, urban, regional, and national bonds.

Indeed, for Whitman, this "dear love" and "attraction" really is the base of all metaphysics, since the radical communion of persons and places is happening all the time on the literal material level. Whitman knew that the same materials making up his body had formed part of countless other animate and inanimate objects. As he wrote in "Song of Myself": "Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me, / My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could over lay it" (239). The speaker continues:

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,  
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,  
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,  
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care. (239)

To Whitman, this means that in the very matter of our physical bodies, we are already in communion with countless human and nonhuman beings and objects from our material past, and with countless human beings who will share our very atoms in the future. As such, he could literally mean what he claims in "Song of Myself": "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (188).

It is precisely this radical faith in the atomic, material communion undergirding all things that allowed him to retain hope for wholeness and goodness, even in the face of destruction and death—an optimism that Huidobro found impossible to share. In his poem "This Compost," Whitman's speaker finds himself struck with horror at the thought that the natural world perpetually absorbs the dead human bodies buried in it:

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?  
How can you be alive you growths of spring?

How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?  
 Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?  
 Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead? (495).

“Where have you disposed of their carcasses?,” the speaker asks the earth, “Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?” (495). He continues, “I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv’d, / I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath, / I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat” (495).

But then he exclaims, “What chemistry! / That the winds are really not infectious...” (496). He realizes that the sea “will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,” and “That all is clean forever and forever,” even though “every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease” (496). Now the speaker finds himself “terrified” with wonder at the generosity of “the Earth,” because “[i]t grows such sweet things out of such corruptions...” (496). “It gives such divine materials to men,” he concludes, “and accepts such leavings from them at last” (497). It is a statement of Whitman’s tremendous faith in the natural processes of the material world, working out “such sweet things” from even the apparent foulness and horror of death, to make wholeness and goodness come from the breakdown of bodily decay (497). Let’s look now at how Whitman applies this metaphysical faith to the most bloody and destructive event of his entire lifetime: the Civil War.

A keen journalistic observer during the 1850s, Whitman had watched mounting tensions between slave-state and free-state interests leading up to the War of Secession, as southern and northern states and territories strained at the political union that seemingly yoked them to their ideological enemies. Secession was in the air, and blood

flowed in the Kansas territory and even on the Senate floor<sup>250</sup> in 1855 to 1856, while the Union seemed more and more likely to fail. Little wonder that Whitman's poetic vision would be an embracing, unifying one from the very first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. A key example illustrates how Whitman's faith in the perpetual material unification of all things helped him to make meaning out of these traumatic experiences: in an entry of his 1875 Civil War memoir, *Memoranda During the War*, titled "The Million Dead, Too, Summ'd Up," he described the aftermath of the war, as across the nation slain soldiers disintegrated into "skeletons, bleach'd bones, tufts of hair, buttons, fragments of clothing" (777). But in Whitman's vision, this breakdown of decay leads ultimately into material and spiritual communion:

. . . (the land entire is saturated, perfumed with their impalpable ashes' exhalation in Nature's chemistry distill'd, and shall be so forever, and every grain of wheat and ear of corn, and every flower that grows, and every breath we draw,)—not only Northern dead leavening Southern soil—thousands, aye many tens of thousands, of Southerners, crumble to-day in Northern earth. (777)

Northern soldiers become southern soil, and southern soldiers become northern crops, as the vast "chemistry" of nature makes amity out of enmity, unity out of diversity, and wholeness out of the fractured bodies and states of the now "forever"-Union (777). From Whitman's perspective, Huidobro should have nothing to fear: intimate human love, strong political Union, and the wide embrace of global community could all exist because, to Whitman, on a material level all things are always already becoming one. Unfortunately, as we have seen in the case of Nicaragua, human imperfection and US foreign policy have frequently made this unitive embrace menacing, rather than benign.

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<sup>250</sup> In the Senate chamber, on 22 May 1856, pro-slavery US Representative Preston Brooks savagely beat Massachusetts Republican Senator Charles Sumner with his cane.

## Beyond Chapter Two: Whitman's “Language Experiment”

Like Huidobro, José Coronel and the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* were pushing back against the imperialist embrace of Latin America by US culture and foreign policy. And unlike Huidobro, the Nicaraguan group felt that Whitman might be a useful resource in fighting that battle: in his writings on texts such as Whitman's “Starting from Paumanok” and *An American Primer*, we can see José Coronel reading Whitman as a pioneer of linguistic independence. Thus, for him, Whitman's project of defining and employing an “American” language became part of a new national literature whose “Nicaraguan words” could fight back against the territorial, cultural, and linguistic encroachments of the US. But Coronel's appropriation also signals an aspect of Whitman's “American” literary experiment that we might too easily overlook: Whitman's radical national resistance to the literary and cultural dominance that Europe still exercised in the nineteenth-century US.

It is worth recalling that although United States literature today has a certain level of global prestige, during the Colonial period and the first half of the nineteenth century, US literature was not always well regarded, even by US citizens. For although the colonies and subsequently the United States had long been producing their own literature, even as late as the nineteenth century Tennyson, Dickens, and the other European writers still held no little sway over the readership of our young nation. In 1820, the acerbic English clergyman Sydney Smith had famously asked in *The Edinburgh Review*: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? Or goes to see an American play?” (79). In 1835, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed: “America has

hitherto produced very few writers of distinction; it possesses no great historians, and not a single eminent poet" (I.xvii). Even Emerson himself admitted in his 1844 essay "The Poet," "I look in vain for the poet I describe" and "We have yet had no genius in America" (465). To be fair, it is painting in pretty broad strokes for these men to claim that the nation whose authors included J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Phyllis Wheatley, Washington Irving, and Margaret Fuller had as of yet no literary talent; but the truth is that Europe did, in fact, still exercise a great deal of cultural and literary dominance in the US. Enter Walt Whitman, in 1855, eager and ready to anoint himself the American bard and to assert a new, unique, and independent American literature.

Now in his books, Whitman often denies any desire to reject the traditions, literatures, or cultures of the United States' European past. In his "Song of the Exposition," his speaker says, "We do not blame thee elder World, nor really separate ourselves from thee, / (Would the son separate himself from the father?)" (344). In his Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, the first words are "AMERICA does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions" (5). But he goes on to describe the inherited past as a "slough" which "still sticks to opinions and manners and literature" and as a "corpse... slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house" (5). In his poem "Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood," he writes to America:

The conceits of the other poets of other lands I'd bring thee not,  
Nor the compliments that have served their turn so long,  
Nor rhyme, nor the classics, nor perfume of foreign court or indoor  
library;  
But an odor I'd bring as from forests of pine in Maine, or breath of an  
Illinois prairie.... (568-569).

And in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” Whitman’s speaker says:

Have the elder races halted?  
 Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?  
 We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,  
 Pioneers! O pioneers!  
 All the past we leave behind.... (371-372)

Indeed, I would argue that Coronel’s nationalist appropriation of Whitman reveals that Whitman himself had worked hard to “leave the past behind” by waging a very serious war of language against the Old World. He laid out this new American Revolution in a series of manuscript notes, written mainly in the 1850s. When Horace Traubel published the notes after Whitman’s death, he titled it *An American Primer*, but Whitman’s manuscript bears the typical Whitmanian title: “The Primer of Words: for American Young, Men, and Women, For Literats, Orators, Teachers, Musicians, Judges, Presidents, &c.” It is in this “Primer of Words,” from the published version of which José Coronel quotes, that we see Whitman’s explicit plan for a truly Independent American culture.

In his early manuscript notes for “The Primer of Words,” Whitman calls for a radical widening of the boundaries of so-called “proper” American language. “The appetite of the people of These States,” Whitman writes, “in popular speeches and writings, is for unhemmed latitude, coarseness, directness, live epithets, explitives [sic] words of opprobrium, resistance...” (741). “Many of the slang words,” he suggests, “among fighting men, gamblers, thieves, prostitutes, are powerful words” (735). The spoken dialects of Americans will create our own high culture to compete with Europe, as he suggests that in the African American dialect we see the roots of a future “native grand opera in America” (748).

But a significant portion of the project of his “Primer of Words” consists of the forging of new words to resist and replace the old words of the Old World. “I think,” he writes, “I am done with many of the words of the past hundred centuries.—I am mad that their poems, bibles, words, still rule and represent the earth, and are not—superceded [sic]” (739). Whitman’s manuscript is telling here, because before he wrote “done with,” he wrote “startled at,” and crossed it out, and before he wrote “mad,” he wrote “terrified,” and did the same (739): here the “poems, bibles,” and “words” of the Old World constitute a very real threat to his American cultural independence (739). “California is sown thick,” he writes, “with the names of all the little and big saints—(Chase them away and substitute aboriginal names” (752). “All aboriginal names sound good...” he says, “...They are honest words” (743).

To resist the cultural and literary influence of Europe, Whitman asks for new names for virtually everything in America: “No country can have its own poems,” he writes, “without it hav[ing] its own names” (754). He calls for an “escape” “from the shoals of Johns, Peters, Davids, Marys,” and asks “could other words be prefixed or suffixed to these, to make them show who they are, what land they were born in, what government, which of The States...?” (744-745). America needs, Whitman feels, new native names for its rivers, its places, towns, counties, and cities, and he singles out the city of Baltimore, named after the English Catholic Lord who was the original proprietor of the Maryland colony, as one of the “names to be Revolutionised,” written with a capital R (752). “The great proper names used in America,” Whitman continues later, “must commemorate things belonging to America, and dating thence.—Because What is America for? To commemorate the old myths and the gods? To repeat the Mediterranean

here? Or the uses and growths of Europe here?—No;—(Nä-o—o) but to destroy all those from the purposes of the earth, and to erect a new earth in their place” (755).<sup>251</sup> In his manuscript notes, Whitman even calls for the creation of new names for the months, and the days of the week: “Now,” he writes, “the days signify extinct gods and goddesses—the months half-unknown rites and emperors—and chronology with the rest is all foreign to America—All exiles and insults here” (755). Whitman insists: “I have heard it said that when the spirit arises that does not brook submission and imitation, it will throw off all ultramarine names.—That spirit already walks the streets of the cities of These States—I, and others, illustrate it” (755).

Whitman intended these notes to be lectures (as is evident in his pronunciation note for “No” in the above manuscript, rendered with an American drawl), which he ultimately never delivered, but the notion of an American language obsessed him for the length of his poetic career. “This subject of language interests me—interests me,” he said once to Traubel:

I never quite get it out of my mind. I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment... The new world, the new times, the new peoples, the new vista, need a tongue according—yes, what is more, will have such a tongue—will not be satisfied until it is evolved. (qtd. in Traubel “Foreword” ix)

Like the literary and political project of Coronel and the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia*, Whitman’s proposed American Revolution has been a mixture of failure and success. A failure, in that US readers have rightly insisted on still engaging and promoting the great books, ideas, and words of the past—as Whitman himself did—and on allowing them to shape and inform our own artistic, political, philosophical or theological labors. Habit

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<sup>251</sup> Here Whitman spells out the word “No” phonetically, perhaps for emphasis, but also perhaps to sound out the “American” pronunciation.

and custom have preserved the old names for months and days, and Baltimore is—to Whitman's posthumous dismay—still called Baltimore. But we ought to recall that for Whitman, American Democracy and American Language are inextricably linked, because then we can see Whitman's “language experiment” as a major success for the American experiment. For Whitman, an American language that is an aggregate of African-American dialect, indigenous words, slang from carriage-drivers and the oaths of dock-workers will in turn engender the American democratic nation in which all of these people, and their words, have a voice. Whitman's America, like the long inclusive catalogues of his poems, welcomes everyone and everything. As Emerson wrote in “The Poet,” “America is a poem in our eyes” (465).

Indeed, Whitman's American language experiment is precisely that: an American—rather than a US—project. Given Whitman's distinction between the two terms, as discussed in the prior section, we can see Coronel and the Nicaraguan *Vanguardia* not just following the thread of Whitman's linguistic program, but as some of Whitman's intended heirs to a transnational American language project. Whitman wrote in the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” (5). As Folsom points out, the ambiguity here allows for the existence of “Americans” in other nations, who inherit, and in fact participate in, the American experiment—both poetic and political (“What a Filthy” 108).<sup>252</sup> The *Vanguardia*'s fierce expressions of autochthonous Nicaraguan language and poetics, marshaled to resist US intervention, intersect with

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<sup>252</sup> Folsom writes: “We can hear this sentence of course in a couple of ways—‘out of all the nations on earth, *Americans* have the fullest poetical nature,’ or, ‘*Americans of all nations*’ have the fullest poetical nature. In the first reading, ‘America’ is synonymous with the ‘United States,’ but in the second ‘America’ designates not a nation but a *quality*—here a quality that nurtures the poetic nature—available in *all* nations” (108).

Whitman's own New World resistance to the foreign cultural pressures of his day. These "Nicaraguan words," then, as Whitman called them in his "Primer of Words," represent an integral part of the fertile, independent new language of his—and our—America (747).

### **Beyond Chapter Three: "To Formulate the Modern"**

In Chapter Three, we saw how the Spanish *Ultraistas* refashioned Whitman as the urban-industrial poet of modernity, allowing Manuel Maples Arce and the Stridentists to co-opt Whitman for their radical project of bringing Mexico into the twentieth century; we have also seen that for Edward Weston, Whitman's poetic vision of a country including both rural and ultramodern settings meant the promise of national strength to face the pending crisis of the Second World War. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how Whitman humanized his own representations of industry and the urbe with the adhesive forces of interpersonal love, comradeship, and friendship, and how he thus provided a necessary antidote to the risks of dehumanization and alienation inherent in many of the structures of modernity. Much has been written on Whitman's perspective on the modern urban industrial progress of his day,<sup>253</sup> but what did Whitman himself have to say about the fraught term, "modernity"? What, for him, constituted the modern?

Whitman very much considered himself to be a poet of the modern, and he once

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<sup>253</sup> On the subject of Whitman the city, see for instance James L. Machor's "Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal: Hawthorne, Whitman, and the Literary Pattern," William Sharpe's *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*, Dana Brand's "'Immense Phantom Concourse': Whitman and the Urban Crowd," Joseph Murphy's "The Loafer and the Loaf-Buyer: Whitman, Franklin, and Urban Space," Lytle Shaw's "Whitman's Urbanism," or Maria Farland's "Decomposing City: Walt Whitman's New York and the Science of Life and Death." On the subject of the modern, see Alan Trachtenberg's "Walt Whitman: Precipitant of the Modern," or Earl L. Bradsher's very early and laughably anti-Catholic examination of Whitman's views on sex in modernity, "Walt Whitman and a Modern Problem."

told Traubel that *Leaves of Grass* “strives to speak for the modern, for certain tendencies” (*With Walt Whitman* 4.292). In *Leaves of Grass*, in his prose writings, and in his conversations with Traubel, Whitman seems to use this term in two main ways: first, as a simple adjective meaning “up to date, recent, or contemporary,” and second, as a profound idea that somehow represents his whole project. In the first usage, Whitman frequently refers to things like “modern dress,” or “modern science” (*With Walt Whitman* 1.47, 183). But in the second, Whitman uses “modern” as a flexible yet significant category of being and acting that overlaps his definitions of the United States, of America, and of Democracy.

In his poem “To a Locomotive in Winter,” Whitman dwells admiringly on the shape and meaning of this important machine, and hails it as “Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent” (583). Here the railroad as an “emblem of motion and power” and therefore a “[t]ype of the modern,” suggests an initial way into understanding Whitman’s fascinating use of this term. We see his emphasis on the lively “motion” of modernity again in Whitman’s “St. Louis Memoranda,” a short prose recollection of his visit to the city, where he admires the “store-streets, showy, modern, metropolitan, with hurrying crowds, vehicles, horse-cars, hubbub, plenty of people, rich goods” (870). In his entry on Denver, he likewise admires the lively hustle and bustle of modernity’s movement: “plenty of people, ‘business,’ modernness” (“Denver Impressions” 861). But for Whitman the greater significance of the commerce, business (busy-ness?) and motion of modernity is that it ultimately brings about national growth and expansion.

For Whitman, the movement of US expansion and growth was a fundamentally

“modern” phenomenon, as we can see from his poem “The Prairie States.” The short, six-line poem celebrates the westward expansion and development of the great US prairies. Although the speaker describes the states as “[a] newer garden of creation,” he considers them not the least bit rustic, backwards, or rural—“no primal solitude”—but rather a concrete example of bustling, productive, moving modernity (524): “Dense, joyous, modern, populous millions, cities and farms, / With iron interlaced, composite, tied, many in one...” (524). By 1880 when Whitman wrote the poem, he had witnessed—and would continue to do so until his death—the entrance of the many prairie states into the Union, as well as their subsequent development and growth, as they integrated themselves into their modern nation.

But Whitman’s firm belief in westward expansion as a manifestation of modernity finds perhaps its best expression in his “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” set in the utter West of the continental US. The poem describes the development of, and westward expansion into, California, and gives voice to the “death-chant” of the redwood tree as settlers chop it down for the sake of progress (351). However, the tree joyfully welcomes the coming US expansion:

*Nor yield we mournfully majestic brothers,  
We who have grandly fill'd our time;  
With Nature's calm content, with tacit huge delight,  
We welcome what we wrought for through the past,  
And leave the field for them. (352, emphasis in original)*

The tree hails and welcomes the “superber race,” of US settlers, saying, “*For them we abdicate...*” (352); and the human speaker of the poem describes

The century-lasting, unseen dryads, singing, withdrawing,  
All their recesses of forests and mountains leaving,  
From the Cascade range to the Wahsatch, or Idaho far, or Utah,  
To the deities of the modern henceforth yielding.... (353-354).

The poem goes on to admire the development of the West by “[a] swarming busy race settling and organizing everywhere,” rapidly turning nature into the means of production (354): “Populous cities, the latest inventions, the steamers on the rivers, the railroads, with many a thrifty farm, with machinery, / And wool and wheat and the grape, and digging for gold” (354). It is this lively mobilization of settlers, this “swarming busy race” that brings with it, as the poem describes, “the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal, / Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America...” (354, 355).

Westward expansion is, then, constitutes the making of the modern because it is the literal creation of the United States, and therefore of America—not because the two are identical but because the United States is *where* the formation of “America” is, for Whitman, destined to begin. Indeed, we see the relation between the modern and these two overlapping terms in Whitman’s poem “Thou Mother With Thy Equal Brood”; he addresses the US, the nation he describes as “Thou Mother with thy equal brood, / Thou varied chain of different States, yet one identity only...” (568). The speaker promise to “sow a seed for thee of endless Nationality,” and to “show away ahead thy real Union, and how it may be accomplish’d” (568). Then the speaker proposes to sing “what is yet to come” for the US, and shifts the poem almost immediately to address “America” (568). It is in this that we can see that “America” is the future, the result, the end-goal of the United States, so we can read “thy real Union, and how it may be accomplish’d” as referring to the future “America” (568). And it is this idea of America that Whitman equates with the modern.

“Brain of the New World,” his speaker exclaims, “what a task is thine, / To formulate the Modern—out of the peerless grandeur of the modern, / Out of thyself...”

(569). The modern “New World” further expands in the poem: “(The true New World, the world of orbic science, morals, literatures to come,) / Thou wonder world yet undefined, unform'd, neither do I define thee” (571). The speaker states, “I see thy light lighting, and thy shadow shadowing, as if the entire globe,” and later calls “America” “Thou globe of globes!” (571, 573). Here America has grown and spread, as we have seen so often in Whitman’s imaginary, into a transnational—or even post-national—idea, in which a global “America” is the “Modern” that the New World will “formulate” (569).

We have seen before how Whitman’s metaphysical system and his belief in the adhesive interpersonal love undergird his poetic vision of a global community. This community will be fundamentally modern insofar as it is democratic—the third major term within Whitman’s semantic field for “modern.” In his *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman links the terms when he calls for “Literatures, perfect personalities and sociologies, original, transcendental, and expressing (what, in highest sense, are not yet express'd at all,) democracy and the modern” (931). He continues, insisting that America “must sternly promulgate her own new standard, yet old enough, and accepting the old, the perennial elements, and combining them into groups, unities, appropriate to the modern, the democratic, the west...” (969). He goes on to respectfully dismiss Jesus, the Greeks, the Romans, Dante, Shakespeare, Kant, and Hegel, claiming that they were “grown not for America, but rather for her foes, the feudal and the old—while our genius is democratic and modern” (974). Indeed, we can even read the term “Democracy” as an appositive noun for “Modern” in Whitman’s poem, “Eidólons” (170): “The prophet and the bard,” his speaker says, must “mediate to the Modern, to Democracy, interpret yet to them...” (170).

What is modern about democracy is not just its promise of equality or its historically recent reformulation by the founders of the United States, but rather its ability to embrace, organize, and mobilize vast numbers of individuals into one united body.

Whitman's poem "Small the Theme of My Chant" insists, "I speak the word of the modern, the word En-Masse" (628). This "En-Masse" modernity means the uniting of countless peoples, and—as we have seen—transcends national and political boundaries.

As Whitman writes in an essay:

Perhaps the most illustrious culmination of the modern may thus prove to be a signal growth of joyous, more exalted bards of adhesiveness, identically one in soul, but contributed by every nation, each after its distinctive kind. Let us, audacious, start it. Let the diplomats, as ever, still deeply plan, seeking advantages, proposing treaties between governments, and to bind them, on paper: what I seek is different, simpler. I would inaugurate from America, for this purpose, new formulas—international poems. ("Poetry in America" 1024-1025).

These "international poems" that Whitman calls for "from America" will effect the en-masse body of democratic modernity. Speaking of this new globally-uniting poetry to come, Whitman writes, "One thing, it must run through entire humanity (this new word and meaning Solidarity has arisen to us moderns) twining all lands like a divine thread, stringing all beads, pebbles or gold, from God and the soul, and like God's dynamics and sunshine illustrating all and having reference to all." (1256). In the complex symbolic equation of Whitman's modernity, the US, America, Democracy, the globe, and "entire humanity" will be joined in the "new word and meaning Solidarity" that "has arisen to us moderns" (1256). Of the United States' central role in the inauguration of the modern, Whitman writes in the Preface to the 1876 *Leaves of Grass*: "For though perhaps the main points of all ages and nations are points of resemblance, and, even while granting evolution, are substantially the same, there are some vital things in which this Republic,

as to its individualities, and as a compacted Nation, is to specially stand forth, and culminate modern humanity” (1010-1011).

### **Beyond Chapter Four: “All, All,**

#### **Without Exceptions”**

Chapter Four revealed how Latino poets since the Chicano movement of the 1960s have confronted Whitman’s legacy in US literature and culture. Even as José Montoya blamed Whitman for his inability to foresee—or forestall—the social injustices of the twentieth century, this founding father of the *Movimiento Chicano* nonetheless saw value in Whitman’s willingness to speak for, and as one of, the marginalized. Although Jimmy Santiago Baca finds Whitman’s exuberant American exceptionalism somewhat naïve and chauvinistic, Whitman’s bold egalitarian voice, his spirituality, and his poetic embrace of the whole material world still inspired and shaped Baca’s early work. Julia Alvarez, although critical of the powerful, masculinized poetic of Whitman’s poems, nonetheless found her own place and voice within the accepting multitudes of Whitman’s “American” diversity.

These three writers, then—and indeed many Chicano and Latino writers in general—approach Whitman with activist eyes, looking for social solutions to a profound sense of displacement. Alvarez writes as an immigrant, bullied as a child on the playground and alienated by language and culture from mainstream US society. Baca, as a descendant of Mexican-American and Native American heritage, feels the historical displacement of his ancestors, compounded by his own “immigrant” entry into the hostile world of prison. Montoya, a descendant of immigrants, experienced the cultural and geographic displacement of being both a minority and a migrant worker. In this way,

Whitman's usefulness to the displaced voices of immigrants and their descendants leads us to try and come to grips with Whitman's own complex response to the promises and challenges of immigration in the United States.

As a journalist, Whitman wrote extensively and polemically on immigration during the decade or so before he published *Leaves of Grass*. This period, as David Reynolds describes it, was a moment of unprecedented immigration to the US:

As a result of developments abroad, especially the Irish potato famine, immigrants were arriving in America at a pace never known before or since. Between 1845 and 1855, 3 million foreigners swarmed to America's shores, peaking in 1854, when 427,833 arrived. This was the largest proportionate increase in immigrants at any time in American history. (151)

During this period, with the exception of a few months in New Orleans, Whitman was living in New York, and would have witnessed the flood of immigrants into his country. Nativist feelings ran high in the US: many citizens resented the huge influx of predominantly Catholic Irish immigrants, mostly destitute and relatively uneducated. Parties like the Know-Nothings agitated against immigrants and the religion of Rome, calling for an "America for Americans" (qtd. Reynolds 151). On the other hand, insisted some, the US had been founded on immigration and needed immigrant labor to develop its swiftly-expanding western territories. Whitman waded into this cultural and political fray with his customary energy, writing for and editing the New York *Aurora* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, as he worked out what would ultimately be his all-inclusive vision of "America."

In his journalism for the New York *Aurora*, Whitman initiates what Reynolds calls a "strange dance on the Nativist question that would characterize his later journalism and his major poetry" (99). In this "strange dance," we can see Whitman

expressing both the all-embracing “American” welcome that would be his strongly held position for most of his literary life, and also his Nativist leanings—the same spirit of resistance to the Old World that gave us his “Primer of Words.” Embroiled in the educational controversy between Catholics and the Protestant-dominated public schools, Whitman vented his Nativist spleen against the influential Irish-born Bishop Hughes and his immigrant flock.<sup>254</sup> In “Insult to American Citizenship,” of 17 March 1842, Whitman describes the violent disruption of a meeting about the New York public schools by “the lowest class of foreigners,” “with shrieks, loud blasphemy, and howlings in their hideous native tongue” (57). “We saw Irish priests there,” he continues, “—sly, false, deceitful villains—looking on and evidently encouraging the gang who created the tumult” (57). He goes on, “We sorrow for [our] native land. Having no prejudices against foreigners, because they are such, we yet feel that they are becoming altogether too domineering among us” (58).

Whitman’s insistence that this “gang of foreign outcasts and bullies” was “becoming too domineering” expresses the Nativist, anti-Catholic fear that the so-called Old World religious values of Rome and the unruly crowds of immigrants were perverting the true “American” identity and politics. Indeed, as Reynolds notes, immigrants were already shaping US politics for better or worse: vulnerable to the wiles of the New York political machine, many became willing or unwitting pawns to advance

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<sup>254</sup> In their Introduction, Rubin and Brown persuasively argue that Whitman’s underlying philosophy here is “not Nativism but Jeffersonianism,” and posit that “The young editor had come of age in a decade dominated by Jeffersonian anti-clericalism; his other major political deities—Jackson and Van Buren—and many minor ones had also made perfectly clear their belief in the wisdom of keeping church and state separate” (3). However, as his other editorials show, Whitman is also expressing an “Americanist” desire for US cultural, national, and political autonomy that he felt was threatened by the huge influx of immigrants from the Old World.

party interests (140).<sup>255</sup> US cultural and political affairs, Whitman believed, should be governed by “Americans” first. In his editorial “Americanism,” of a week later, he wrote:

The *Aurora* prides itself on being imbued with an *American* spirit. We look upon emigrants to our republic with friendly and generous eyes; but many things they bring with them might far better be left at home. Brought up to believe in the doctrine of loyalty, and the superstitions of every kind that mark all the countries of Europe, these people find it difficult, when they come to our shores, to throw off the opinions they have worn so long. (92)

For the future author of the “Primer of Words,” immigrants are welcome, but must not be allowed to alter or deviate the autonomous course of the American experiment.

Still, Whitman’s views are never outright anti-immigrant, a point upon which he insists the next month in a piece on 18 April 1842.<sup>256</sup> He acknowledges his own patriotic sentiments for the uniqueness of the United States’s project, admitting “...we cannot look round and behold timid servility to a factious gang of foreigners—or the fostering, in our own republic, of trashy and poisonous European literature—or the bending of knees to the dicta of old world critics...without lifting our own voice, and, in our way, doing all that we can to denounce and condemn those things” ([“Native Americanism”] 82).

However, he wishes to distance himself and his paper from outright anti-immigrant Nativism:

Yet with all our antipathy for every thing that may tend to assimilate our country to the kingdoms of Europe, we repudiate such doctrines as have characterised the “Native American” party. We could see no man disfranchised, because he happened to be born three thousand miles off.

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<sup>255</sup> Reynolds writes: “Beginning with the state elections of 1834, Tammany Hall began its long-standing practice of controlling the Manhattan vote through muscle tactics, bribery, and illegal voting. Throughout the 1840s and beyond, Tammany ‘runners’ would meet immigrants at the New York docks, and, in return for giving them illegal naturalizations papers and finding them homes and jobs, secure their vote” (140).

<sup>256</sup> Rubin and Brown title this untitled piece “Native Americanism Repudiated,” which is why I title it in brackets. Here Whitman’s use of “Native American” refers not to the indigenous peoples of North America or the US, but rather to a hard-line Nativist, anti-immigrant political movement that favored those born in the US against foreign immigrants.

We go for the largest liberty—the widest extension of the immunities of the people, as well as the blessings of government. Let us receive these foreigners to our shores, and to our good offices. While it is unbecoming for us to fawn upon them and flatter their whims, it is equally unnecessary that we should draw the line of exclusiveness, and say, stand off, I am better than thou. (82-83)

What emerges clearly here is Whitman's commitment to the democratic and egalitarian values of the United States: he desires "no man disfranchised, because he happened to be born three thousand miles off," and embraces, in language quite evocative of his future poetry, "the largest liberty—the widest extension of the immunities of the people" (83). At stake here for Whitman is not racial purity but the integrity of the US "republic" in its radical break with the monarchies and the "dicta" of Europe" (82); but the US must never violate its commitment to equality, or embrace "exclusiveness, and say, stand off, I am better than thou" (83).

In his work for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* a few years later, Whitman further emphasizes the dignity and humanity of immigrants, and insists on the responsibility of the United States to welcome them. On 3 April 1846, he wrote: "The Irish laborers are ignorant in book-lore we grant—and perhaps uncouth in manners. But they are *men* like us, and have wants and appetites, affection for their offspring, and anger for all kinds of tyranny, and if they don't get work or food, they will starve to death" (qtd. Brasher 127). "Shall we suppose," he continued, "because we came here a few years before them, that they have therefore no claim on the limitless . . . capacities of America for human happiness, not to say subsistence?" (qtd 127). He condemns what he labels the "'foreign' prejudice," and insists that "[t]he petty confines of the Old World are crowded to suffocation. . . . And shall we . . . not encourage . . . the drawing off from superannuated Europe of its poor?" (qtd. 127).

Here Whitman's egalitarian ethic insists that no matter their social or economic status, immigrants must be welcomed into the land and society of North America. Indeed, for Whitman, it was simply wasteful not to share the vast, undeveloped riches of the US and its territories. On 30 September of the same year, he defends the Irish as "adopted citizens of this country," and condemns the "high tone of superciliousness used toward the thousands who come here from the Old World" ("The 'Irish'" 72). They might have "little wealth of money," Whitman acknowledges, but they have "the far more precious, and far more needed here, wealth of sinewy arms, stout hearts, and an energetic will to develop the capacities that lie dormant in America for the increase of individual comfort" (72).

Immigrants have a right to come and work for their share of the wealth of the Americas, Whitman insists, and the analogy he gives as his reasoning provocatively undermines any pretensions of Nativists to having an inherited, exclusive right to the land. "After the cross-bows of the Norman archers were triumphant over the English bills," Whitman writes, "and William the Conqueror pressed the throne of the slain Harold, we opine no man could have been called a trespasser had he come from some distant land, and competed with the new fledged monarch" (72). He continues, "Though our American title here is, perhaps, better than was that of William to his island-sceptre, yet we are not entrenched strong enough in the justice of the claim to turn up our noses at every new comer" (72). Whitman's logic, then, is not merely that US citizens should welcome immigrants because we are descended from immigrants ourselves. Rather, he points to unresolved national guilt ("yet we are not entrenched strong enough in the justice of the claim") over the usurpation of Native American lands, by equating the US

with a monarch known as “the Conqueror” (72). US citizens, Whitman insists, cannot claim as exclusively their own a land to which they themselves have no native right.

Whitman’s magnanimity towards immigrants would emerge in poetic form in the editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In the Preface to the 1855 edition, Whitman praised “the perpetual coming of immigrants” as part of the great panorama of “America” that will inspire the American bard (7). The 1855 edition goes on to emphasize the equality and worth of every human being (albeit in a double negative instead of a positive): in the untitled poem he would later title “Burial,” Whitman insists that

The barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing,  
The common people of Europe are not nothing . . . the American  
aborigines are  
    not nothing,  
A zambo or a foreheadless Crowfoot or a Camanche is not nothing,  
The infected in the immigrant hospital are not nothing.... (105).

In the untitled poem later titled “I Sing the Body Electric,” he writes: “The man's body is sacred and the woman's body is sacred . . . it is no matter who, / Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on the wharf?” (122). The immigrant body, so despised by some for its foreign dress and relative lack of refinement must be acknowledged as “sacred” (122).

Whitman’s “Poem of Many In One,” from the 1856 edition, expresses his belief in a conglomeration America comprising a lively diversity within a vast unity. In a statement that expresses much of his entire philosophy and poetry, Whitman writes: “A NATION announcing itself, / I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated, / I reject none, accept all, reproduce all in my own forms” (180). Immigrants constitute an integral part of this “NATION announcing itself” that will “reject none, accept all” (180): “I see now that this America is only you and me,” Whitman writes, and

continues, “The perpetual arrivals of immigrants are you and me...” (199). Here the idea of “America” has its incarnation in the individuals that make it up, a group that conspicuously includes the immigrants which the Nativists of “Native Americanism” sought to exclude from the national body.

Whitman expresses this notion—that immigrants help constitute “America”—in a most extreme way in his “Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson,” included at the end of the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman writes “Of course, we shall have a national character, an identity. As it ought to be, and as soon as it ought to be, it will be” (357):

With Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Oregon—with the states around the Mexican sea—with cheerfully welcomed immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa—with Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island—with all varied interests, facts, beliefs, parties, genesis—there is being fused a determined character, fit for the broadest use for the freewomen and freemen of The States.... (357)

To state, in 1856, that immigrants from Africa will help shape the “determined character” of the nation, reveals just how radically diverse and welcoming Whitman thought the US ought to be.

Contrary to some, Whitman believed that this radical diversity would not make the United States into a fractured, incoherent series of disconnected ethnic or linguistic communities. The states and citizens of this new nation are to be “each indeed free, each idiomatic, as becomes live states and men,” he says, yet at the same time he insists that they will be “adhering to one enclosing general form of politics, manners, talk, personal style, as the plenteous varieties of the race adhere to one physical form” (357). Here we see the delicate tension between the “one enclosing general form” of America and the “free” and “idiomatic” diversity of its citizens (357). Whitman balances this equation in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”: “The separate States, the simple elastic scheme, the

immigrants, / The Union...always sure and impregnable..." (472). The "impregnable" Union, Whitman firmly believed, drew strength from its diverse qualities, much as concrete derives strength from its aggregates. Thus, in his essay "Preface 1872," Whitman called for the US to become "the modern composite nation, form'd from all, with room for all, welcoming all immigrants..." (1001). The truly "modern" nation, Whitman implies, will be a "composite nation," receiving its form from the wide variety of its inhabitants, "with room for all, welcoming all immigrants..." (1001).

Horace Traubel describes how even late in life, Whitman passionately insisted that this open-armed embrace of immigrants remained integral to the very nature of "America." When another one of Whitman's disciples, Thomas B. Harned, commented that many people believed in restricting immigration, Whitman became enraged. Traubel writes: "W. exclaimed contemptuously: 'All, did you say, Tom—or almost all? Well, here's one who spits it all out...'" (2.34). Whitman went on, "America is for one thing only—and if not for that for what? America must welcome all—Chinese, Irish, German, pauper or not, criminal or not—all, all, without exceptions..." (2.34). "America," Whitman said heatedly,

is not for special types, for the caste, but for the great mass of people—the vast, surging, hopeful, army of workers. Dare we deny them a home—close the doors in their face—take possession of all and fence it in and then sit down satisfied with our system—convinced that we have solved our problem? I for my part refuse to connect America with such a failure—such a tragedy, for tragedy it would be. (2.35)

"W. spoke with the greatest energy," Traubel comments, "It is a subject that always warms him up" (2.35). "You see," Whitman says finally, "that the immigrant, too, like the writer, comes up against the canons, and has to last them out" (Traubel 2.35).

**From Conclusions to Vistas: “*I Was  
Walt Whitman*”**

Few US writers have been able to face “the canons” and “last them out” better than Walt Whitman. As his beloved nation still wrestles with the issues surrounding immigration, Whitman himself has emigrated to countless other languages, cultures, nations, and traditions, becoming part of the canon of world literature. Twenty-first-century readers and writers around the globe still turn to his monumental book, asking—like his “Salut au Monde” speaker—“What do you see Walt Whitman?” (289). This dissertation ends, in a way, with the same question that began it: “Why Whitman?” What was it about this man and his writings that has so captured the hearts and imaginations of international readers? Was it his experimentation with both the form and matter of poetry? Was it his dignifying of the material world? Was it the fresh, vivid language of his poems? Was it his firm belief in the exalted equality of all human beings, a pillar of Whitman’s project that the Englishman G. K. Chesterton called “not a dull leveling but an enthusiastic lifting” (*The Thing*)? Was it his utopian faith that a loving, creative, and just society lay—even if distantly—in the far bright future of democracy?

It is for many of these reasons that Whitman resonated with the diverse, experimental movements of the Latin American *vanguardias*, as they strained to fashion poetry and art that were truly new, truly modern. These *vanguardias*, particularly the Stridentists, continue to capture the attention of scholars:<sup>257</sup> the last five years alone have seen dozens of books and anthologies on the *vanguardias*,<sup>258</sup> especially as archival

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<sup>257</sup> There is even a Facebook group for scholars, students, and fans of Stridentism.

<sup>258</sup> A basic WORLDCAT search, for instance, for books with “vanguardia” in the title reveals the extent to which scholarly interest in Hispanophone avant-gardes remains strong.

research and digitization recovers, preserves, and disseminates more and more primary documents from these movements. My research has revealed a crucial and formative point of intersection between US literature and the *vanguardias*, as these groups appropriated and circulated Whitman's texts and ideas, his politics and his persona across the Americas. We have seen, then, not just the scope of US literature's hemispheric reach, but also the active and even aggressive contribution of Latin America to the political, literary, and aesthetic conversation happening in—and beyond—our hemisphere.

My work in turn gestures towards other areas to be explored, not only by internationalist Whitman scholars, but also by those in hemispheric and Latin American studies, as well scholars of US and Comparative literature. In Julia Alvarez's transnational feminist reading of Whitman, we saw that her response engaged the question of gender and poetic voice, but it seems that most of the known responses to Whitman in Latin America have come from male voices. What has been the appropriation of—or response to—Whitman in Latin America, by women writers, *vanguardista* or otherwise?<sup>259</sup> Springing directly from Chapter Three of this dissertation, there is much work to be done on the Spanish *Ultraísta* appropriation of Whitman—so central to that of Maples Arce and the Stridentists. Where did Rafael Cansinos Assens and Spanish Ultraists encounter Whitman? How did the wide reach of Spanish avant-garde periodical culture shape the European and broader Latin American reception of this *vanguardista* Whitman?

And what about Whitman in the Hispanophone literatures of today? How do

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<sup>259</sup> Fernando Alegría's 1995 book chapter "Whitman in Spain and Latin America," for instance, includes not a single woman writer.

twenty-first century Spanish-language poets read and respond to Whitman? Take for instance the Cuban poet Ivan Gerardo Campanioni, whose poem “Aplausos” [“Applause”] states, “I applauded myself and Walt Whitman / for having been prohibited in his time...” (Campanioni).<sup>260</sup> Of particular interest might also be the popular Argentine poet, Washington Cucurto, whose poem “Maiakovski” makes reference to Whitman’s beard, and echoes the opening stanza of “Song of Myself.”<sup>261</sup> Furthermore, the publication of these two examples on the web also points to another wide open field of inquiry for those interested in Hispanophone responses to Whitman: blogs. These popular online media in many ways echo the prolific periodical poetry of the nineteenth century, as documented by Gruesz in the first chapter of her *Ambassadors of Culture*. A cursory *Google Blogs* search reveals numerous popular Whitman-related poems, translations, biographies, and interpretations written by bloggers.

We can take, in closing, a poem by the Spanish poet, scholar, and blogger Rafael Calero Palma, on his blog *Margen Izquierda [Left Margin]*. Calero’s poem, “Padre Walt Whitman” [“Father Walt Whitman”], begins in the religious vein by addressing Whitman in the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “Father Walt Whitman, / who is in heaven, hallowed be your name...” (Calero).<sup>262</sup> “Blessed may you be forever,” the poem continues, “old and beautiful Walt Whitman, / for having left us the inheritance of free verse.” (Calero)<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> “Me aplaudí a mí mismo y a Walt Whitman / por haber estado prohibido en su tiempo...”

<sup>261</sup> In a literary experiment that Whitman would have appreciated, Cucurto’s alternative publishing house, *Eloisa Cartonera* simultaneously supports the homeless and makes literature cheaply available for readers by buying scrap cardboard from the homeless and binding literary works in it, to sell.

<sup>262</sup> “Padre Walt Whitman, / que estás en los cielos, / santificado sea tu nombre...”

<sup>263</sup> “Bienaventurado seas por siempre,  
viejo y hermoso Walt Whitman,  
por habernos dejado en herencia el verso libre.”

“I believe in you, Walt Whitman,” the long poem continues,

Father Almighty of the poetry of brothers,  
epic origin of the shameless shout,  
divine genesis of contemporary verse,  
because you traveled walking  
with your deerskin boots  
the dusty roads  
that cross the American earth....<sup>264</sup>

As the poem rises to its peroration, it becomes an immense catalogue of global responses to Whitman, as Calero quotes the words of US poets Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, and Allen Ginsburg, as well as the Chileans Pablo Neruda and Pablo de Rokha, the Spaniards León Felipe and Federico García Lorca, the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa, and finally the Cuban José Martí and the Argentine Borges—all responding to Whitman. Making the words his own, Calero ends his poem: “Because I too, like Jorge Luis Borges / exhort you to cry out to the four winds: / *I was Walt Whitman*” (Calero).<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> “Creo en ti, Walt Whitman,  
Padre Todopoderoso de la poesía fraternal,  
origen épico del grito desgarrado,  
génesis divina del verso contemporáneo,  
porque recorriste andando  
con tus botas de piel de ciervo  
los polvorrientos caminos  
que atraviesan la tierra americana...”

<sup>265</sup> “Porque también yo, como Jorge Luis Borges, / os exhorto a que lo gritéis a los cuatro vientos: / *Yo fui Walt Whitman.*”

## APPENDIX



Figure A1: "Actual No. 1." Manuel Maples Arce.

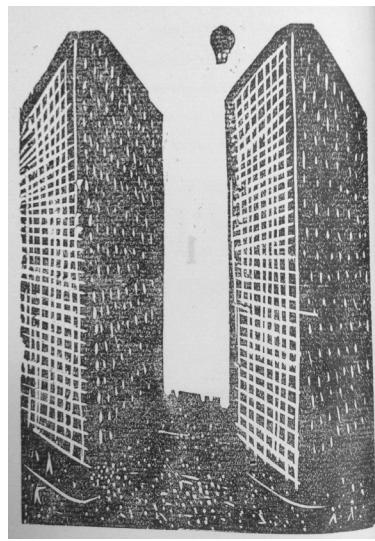


Figure A2: "Skyscrapers." Jean Charlot. Woodcut. 168x121 mm. Print 59 (Morse catalogue). From Manuel Maples Arce, *URBE: super-poema bolchevique en 5 cantos*. México: Andres Botas e hijo, 1924. Print. © The Jean Charlot Estate LLC. With permission.

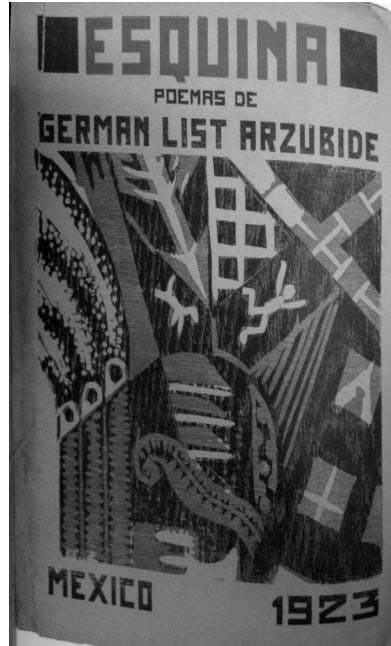


Figure A3: Cover Illustration for *Esquina*. Ramon Alva de la Canal. From *Vanguardia estridentista: soporte de la estética revolucionaria*. Ed. Monserrat Sánchez Soler. México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes: 2010. Print. Used with permission.



Figure A4: Illustrations from *Viajero en el Vértice*. Ramon Alva de la Canal. From *Vanguardia estridentista: soporte de la estética revolucionaria*. Ed. Monserrat Sánchez Soler. México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes: 2010. Print. Used with permission.



Figure A5: Cover of *Irradiador* Number 3. Photograph titled “Steel” by Edward Weston.  
From *Irradiador* 3. Eds. Manuel Maples Arce and Fermín Revueltas.

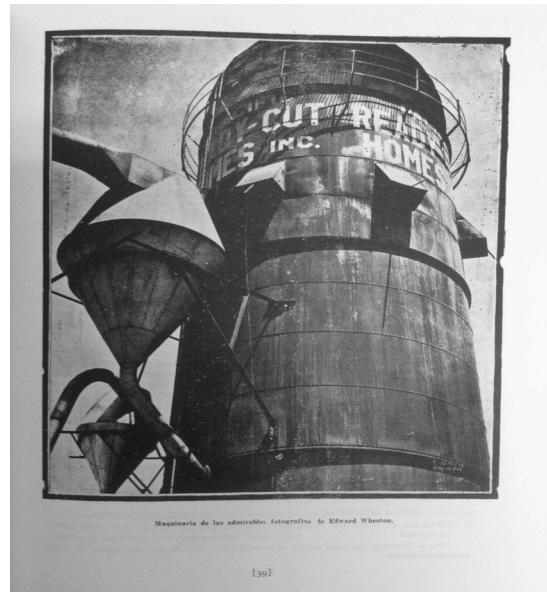


Figure A6: Industrial photograph from *Horizonte*. Edward Weston. From *Horizonte*, 1926-1927. Facsimile edition. Eds. Rocío Guerrero and Elissa Rashkin. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011. Print.



Figure A7: Photograph of Rockefeller Center. Edward Weston. From Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. Intro by Mark Van Doren. Photographs by Edward Weston. New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1942. Print.

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