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John Roche

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Walt Whitman's Temporary Autonomous Zone
John F. Roche *Rochester Institute of Technology*

Were Whitman to saunter down the open road into the 21st Century where the road becomes a Mandelbrot knob becoming a continent on the infinite surface of a Moebius strip generated as an unfolding 4D- image by a computer program experienced spatially by means of cyberwear goggles and datagloves Walt put on today to watch himself sauntering down the open road, would he prefer we touch the man by touching his book? Or look for him under your bootsoles, where grows the grass, translucent sea-green fibers sea-changing like a William Gibson passage to emerald shoots pulsing obscure alphabets the journey work of the stars. Such join'd unended links, each hook'd to the next. The shapes arise!

Whitman seems well suited in some ways to the polymorphic and polysituated character of digital apprehensions, as he intended to be the poet of inclusivity, each kelson of creation hologrammatically part of his impalpable substance. He has, for more than a century, also been the subject, and sometimes the victim, of adulation by enthusiasts, mystics, cranks, and visionaries of all kinds, of which cyber-utopians are the latest variety.

I will utilize one influential text in contemporary cyber-culture, the notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), developed by the poet and Sufi-scholar Peter Lamborn Wilson, in his guise as the cyber-anarchist Hakim Bey, to characterize those spaces of liberation and creativity, no matter how fleeting, that have appeared in the world throughout history and been lovingly nurtured by artists and outlaws of all kinds (like some of the small "free-thought" magazines of Whitman's disciples). Bey's metaphor is also related to "Pirate Utopias," islands in the 18th C. net where hackers of the sea could live outside the rules,

sometimes as intentional communities, and also to Bruce Sterling's cyberpunk classic *Islands in the Net*, about futuristic data pirates.

I will also draw on Paul H. Outka's intriguing and well-considered essay, "Whitmanian Cybernetics" (*Mickle Street #14*), with its caveats about the limitations of cyber-utopianism and the ways the contemporary commercial Internet undermines the liberatory possibilities Whitman represents. I, do, however, take exception to two key points in Paul Outka's introduction, the notion that "cyberspace" is merely a metaphor, and that it represents a disembodied experience at odds with Whitman's somatic insistences. Outka considers cyberspace an example of the hardened or reified metaphor that Nietzsche warns us against. My view is that a term like "Information Superhighway" is a metaphor and nothing more. But "cyberspace," in addition to being a metaphor, is also a phenomenological fact, especially when experienced through the virtual reality interfaces that will become increasingly sophisticated in the coming decades (one only has to note the frightening verisimilitude of today's generation of PlayStation games!).

The term originated with cyberpunk writer William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, in which the novelist defines cyberspace as "A consensual hallucination. . . . Lines of light ranged in the non space of the mind" (155), close to the "neurospace" ("inner-body experience") encountered through drugs or mysticism in Peter Lamborn Wilson's term (*Cybernetics*). As such, it has an experiential presence that goes beyond the merely metaphorical, and, like it or not, must be counted among the older virtual realities that we call haunts of the imagination: the listening space of a symphony, the imaging place of a poem or novel, the breathing space

of prayer or meditation.

But, it can be objected, Whitman was not interested in bloodless, disembodied contemplations, no matter how salutary. In a passage like the following from “Song of Myself,” section 26, Whitman minutely registers his physical, indeed, orgasmic, response to hearing the singer:

I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd them,
It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the indolent waves,
I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,
At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.

Here is a fine example of Proprioceptive art, in Charles Olson's sense, poetry that makes the world one's own through close attention to internal perceptions, “the DEPTH implicit in physical being.” It was a term he borrowed from Norbert Wiener's groundbreaking book *Cybernetics* (1948); it's worth remembering that the computer revolution began with experiments not in artificial intelligence or even faster calculating, but in the establishment of the feedback principle. So, in the novels of William Gibson, hackers in cyberspace are given physical, and sometimes intensely painful, feedback. Just as the text-only Web of Arpanet and Gopher has given way to the visual and kinetic Internet, so cyberspace is likely to evolve towards ever-greater somatic involvement. In 2002, in fact, the first Trans-Atlantic “touch” was recorded: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2002/10/021029070503.htm>

In her impressive 2001 study, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan points to the ways today's electronic literature recapitulates the centuries-old argument in aesthetics

between immersion and interactivity, that is, the kind of story or painting we get “lost in”, one which “transports” the reader or viewer “into a virtual body located on the scene of the action” (4), and the opposing tendency to call attention to form and surface, to expose the magician’s trick and dispense with the illusion. If Baroque *tromp-l’oeil*, a Dickens novel, or the opera Whitman loved are prime examples of the former, so a Cubist painting, a Salman Rushdie novel, or a Michael Joyce hypertext are examples of the latter. Marie-Laure Ryan notes that virtual reality has been defined as “an interactive, immersive experience generated by a computer” (2). Thus, VR literature partakes in BOTH immersion and interactivity, as the hypertextual aspect, one that involves attention to links and paths and cognitive choices, is balanced by the cyberspace illusion, the consciousness of an ‘avatar’ or virtual body, and the imaginative presence of “an autonomous, language-independent reality populated with live human beings” (14). Drawing on the works of the aesthetician Suzanne Langer and the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, she goes on to argue that consciousness is embedded, or situated in the body, and that virtual reality is similarly situated.

It is this doubleness that Whitman embraces, as he conjures up vision after vision of personalities engaged in their daily acts of living—the blacksmith, the runaway slave, children watching a knife grinder, the woman watching the twenty-eight young men bathe, the dying soldiers, the lorry drivers and the commuters on Brooklyn Ferry, and yet he foregrounds them all in his song, where they vanish like so many sparkles on the wheel. He indulges our need for transport, our desire for pathos, then pulls us back from “the verge of a usual mistake” and warns us against too great an identification with the products of fancy, warns us, too, not to take anything at second or third hand, not even from him.

His is a mimetic art honed by the vignettes he wrote as a young reporter for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle and other newspapers, but also with a skepticism about mimesis learned in that tough-minded business. Walt was intimately involved with the communications technologies and new media of his day, from his days in the printing trade and newspaper business and political parties, at a time America was, as he said, “a newspaper-ruled people” (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, Brasher 23), and the science of mass persuasion was being formulated. As Paul Outka points out, “Whitman saw a genuine revolution in communications, one that we are still riding out” (Mickle Street #14).

He was also intensely interested in new technologies like photography or the trans-Atlantic telegraph or the Corliss Engine he (like Henry Adams, famously) saw at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, developments that would challenge his age’s assumptions no less than the Internet does our own, providing us as he said in “Passage to India,” with “a new earth to be spann’d, connected by network.” But he was equally dazzled by the small miracles technology provided, such as live orange buds from Florida!

“Who touches this book touches a man,” but also myriad men. Section 33 of “Song of Myself,” with its astounding cataloguing of vignettes, is a precursor to virtual reality, at first imaged as a panoramic balloon ride, but gradually becoming an exercise in metempsychosis:

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision

The empathic transformations continue until section 38, where, after merging with cholera patient and beggar, the poet exclaims, “Enough! Enough! Enough!” and discovers

himself “on the verge of a usual mistake,” that is, a drowning of the self in excess sympathy, the dangerous “merge” D.H. Lawrence objected to in Whitman (“merge” is also the name of a futuristic body-melding drug in Rudy Rucker’s *Wetware*). This empathy overload is analogous to the side effects of the “sim-stim” ride Case takes in *Neuromancer*, when he views the world through the eyes (and the body) of Molly the Razor Girl.

Whitman’s narrative of metamorphoses, for all its dangers, is a song of democratic diversity, of the individuals within what he calls the “en-masse” or the ensemble. His book he claims is only a language game, but it is a serious game, parallel to the language game we now know genes play. His poem is not merely a recorder but a participant in the evolution of a more democratic society and a more complex universe consonant with the “kosmos” of himself. His syntax is as metamorphic as his subject, an experiment attempting to capture in language the constant creation of creating. In this sense, it parallels the “rheomode” (fr. *Gk rheo*, to flow) of the influential physicist David Bohm, a language construct that emphasizes the verbal root-form of words to “relevate” a neo-Heraclitean worldview in which “all is an unbroken and undivided whole movement” (47).

Or as poet Robert Duncan argued, “Whitman was the poet of primary intuitions, ancestor of Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* and of our own vision of creation, where we now see all life as unfoldings, the revelations of a field of potentialities and latencies towards species and individuals hidden in the DNA, a field of generations larger than our humanity” (*Fictive Certainties*” 167-168).

Whitman’s blithe “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself,” and

the poetry it made possible, is all the more remarkable in that he lived in the positivistic age of Comte and Tain and Spenser, long before Bohr's Complementarity Principle or Gödel's theorem, without the examples of Borges' paradoxical fiction, Escher's castles, or Olson's Field Theory of Composition.

If, as N. Katherine Hayles reminds us, "One of the important points of continuity between Romanticism and the field concept is the appearance of inherent limits on sequential, logical analysis" (18-19), then Whitman's poetic catalogues and their juxtapositions can be seen as early experiments in controlled particle collisions. These catalogues have a number of possible inspirations, of course. Ruth Bohan has argued for the "cacophony of visual and intellectual stimulation" at the painting exhibitions Whitman frequented, while Miles Orvell and others have suggested the daguerreotype galleries as model (Bohan 21, 27fn). But his reactive poetry hearkens back to an earlier chamber, the crucible of the alchemist, whose fabled experiments continued to entice the Romantic poets and their fellow travelers, scientists like Johann Ritter, Lorenz Oken, and Hans Oersted, who sought verification in the natural world of the tenets of Transcendentalism, discovering ultraviolet light and electro-magnetism in that pursuit.

Whitman's meta-science he termed "scientism"; its derivations are myriad: the Pre-Socratics at second-hand, his fascination with Egyptology, the Roman naturalist Lucretius, whose *De Rerum Natura* the poet underlined, astronomy as hobby (Allen 123-141), and the fashionable pseudo-sciences of phrenology, mesmerism, and galvanism (Aspiz 109-179). No less than Goethe's or Coleridge's Naturphilosophie, which he absorbed through Emerson and his circle, Whitman's scientism attempts to heal the Cartesian split, to reconnect body and

mind, man and nature, observer and observed. Thus, the opening of “Song of Myself”: “For every atom belonging to me belongs as well to you.

“Song of Myself” can be viewed, for some purposes at least, as a hologram fragment of Leaves of Grass, the whole in miniature. Even considered as a separate poem, “Song of Myself” is one extended trip into the matrix, a continual metamorphosis whose leaves ache to be read spatially, in simultaneity, as a cipher-space. Letters are suspended in this space that reveal the self and yet obscure the self, even as they appear and disappear from the reader’s vantage like the neon words on a Jenny Holzer LED screen, or the oracular apparitions in Gibson’s Count Zero. Whitman anticipated Joyce and Borges in building a perpetual motion machine made of words: “Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you”).

It is not surprising that many of Whitman’s friends and followers were professional men and women, many with interests in science or invention, including doctors like Bucke and Wiksell, psychologists like William James, naturalists like Burroughs, Arts & Crafts advocates like Traubel, Price, Triggs, and Carpenter, or architects like Bragdon, Sullivan, and Wright.

As Michael Robertson has delineated ([Mickle Street #16](#)), many of Whitman’s disciples hovered on the border between Science and Mysticism, involving themselves in Spiritualism, Theosophy, and similar movements, while holding to Whitmanian individualism as a shield against dogmatic or slavish cultism. Each of his followers pursued a vision of inclusivity that was at once spiritual, political, and scientific (though each differed in their interpretation of same). Dr. Bucke coined the term “cosmic consciousness,” while the South

African Whitman scholar J.C. Smuts coined the term “holism.” It is no surprise, given the proselytizing efforts of Bucke, Traubel, and Carpenter (not to mention Sadakichi Hartmann), that Whitman would be given a prominent, if qualified, place in both William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he is the figure of the Healthy-minded Man (Ch. 4), and in William Butler Yeats’ *A Vision*.

It would be foolish to claim for Whitman’s already prodigious legacy a role in the development of cyberspace itself— Al Gore had more claim on paternity of the Internet! But there is a circuitous network of connections and passages that suggest an indirect role. We know that his was a vision of democratic interconnectivity that appealed to many progressives, radicals, and avant-gardists worldwide over the course of many decades. We know some of them were scientists, like A.N. Whitehead, who pointed to Whitman as an inspiration. We also know his importance to the assertion of the Beat Movement and subsequent Counterculture, through Allen Ginsberg and others. As William Irwin Thompson has noted, “The true prophet of American mysticism and democratic politics is not Sri Anybodynanda, but Walt Whitman” (*Passages* 180).

But what is perhaps less well known is the interpenetration between bohemia and the scientific avant-garde that developed the initial cybernetic theories and then subsequently the hardware and software necessary to people cyberspace. Among the early pioneers of cybernetics read were a number of utopians, mystics, or LSD researchers, including Gregory Bateson, Arthur Koestler, Harold Abramson, and Frank Fremont-Smith.

Smuts’ *Hollism and Evolution* was a key text for them, as it provided an antidote to the

reductionistic science and mechanistic worldview of the day. After reading Whitman and experiencing a “liberation,” Smuts wrote a book called *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (1895), then followed it with an uncompleted book based on Whitman’s concept of the ensemble” that Smuts called “The Idea of the Whole.” This, then formed the basis of a longer work he eventually published as *Holism and Evolution* (1926), a book that immediately created a sensation, and influenced the work of biologists and physicists like R.G. Collinwood and JS Haldane, as well, perhaps, as his son the evolutionist JSB Haldane, a friend of the original cyberneticist, Norbert Wiener. The Gestalt Psychologist and Esalen guru Fritz Perls, too, is said to have been influenced by Smuts’ book (Yontef).

The cross-pollination between an incipient science of the Whole and a bohemia informed by Whitman’s insistence on allowing each individual, each “kelson of creation,” to “furnish your parts toward the soul” is not too surprising, and would be followed by the Countercultural tinge of the Berkeley Computer Club and the early Silicon Valley, not without the paradoxical ties to Pentagon and CIA that characterized the early cyberneticists. The Eighties Cyberpunk or “New Edge” movement, associated with Timothy Leary’s *High Frontiers*, later *Mondo 2000*, magazine, with the psychedelic millennialism of writers like Jaron Lanier, Terence McKenna, Rudy Rucker, Queen Mu, and R.U. Sirius, was only one more manifestation of this interface, one perhaps only a bit more flamboyant than Sadakichi Hartmann’s “perfume music” concerts and early light shows in the Greenwich Village of the 1920s.

Hakim Bey’s metaphor of the Temporary Autonomous Zone was a key expression of the Mondo/ New Edge counterculture, and remains one of its most widely surfed and

appropriated documents <http://www.hermetic.com/bey/taz3.html> .

It also contains a number of aspects that are resonant with Whitmanian bohemia, whether in Traubel's time or our own. Invoking the brief Munich republic of 1919, where the libertarian socialist Gustav Landauer and a number of artists held important positions, Bey says, "Imagine what it must have been to breathe the air of a city in which the Minister of Culture has just predicted that schoolchildren will soon be memorizing the works of Walt Whitman. Ah for a time machine..."

Hakim Bey's first characteristic of the TAZ is its penchant for ersatz communities: "The band is open--not to everyone, of course, but to the affinity group, the initiates sworn to a bond of love." This certainly fits the society of comrades of which Whitman and his disciples spoke.

The second characteristic is the TAZ as festival, which invites analogy to the annual Whitman dinners that occurred in many cities in the decades following the poet's death. Bey begins by referring to the American anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews, whose free-love position Whitman condemned (though the poet's friend Henry Clapp was associated with Andrews and his cause):

Pearl Andrews was right: the dinner party is already "the seed of the new society taking shape within the shell of the old" (IWW Preamble). The sixties-style "tribal gathering," the forest conclave of eco-saboteurs, the idyllic Beltane of the neo-pagans, anarchist conferences, gay faery circles...Harlem rent parties of the twenties, nightclubs, banquets, old-time libertarian picnics--we should realize that all these are already "liberated zones" of a sort, or at least potential TAZs. Whether open only to a few friends, like a dinner party, or to thousands of celebrants, like a Be-In, the party is always "open" because it is not "ordered"; it may be planned, but unless it "happens" it's a failure. The element of spontaneity is crucial. (Bey, Taz)

Bey says for his third characteristic, “Vital in shaping TAZ reality is the concept of psychic nomadism (or as we jokingly call it, "rootless cosmopolitanism).” Here he draws on Deleuze and Guattari to indicate a project devoted to “a de-centering of the entire "European" project, open[ing] a multi-perspectived post- ideological worldview able to move "rootlessly" from philosophy to tribal myth, from natural science to Taoism....” (TAZ). Whitman is certainly multi-perspectived, but rather than consider *Leaves of Grass* a decentering of the European project, Whitman saw his poem, and America, as transcending that project but nevertheless its ultimate fulfillment, as poems like “*Passage to India*” and “*Prayer of Columbus*” make clear.

So the rootlessness of “*Song of the Open Road*” is not the same as that of the psychic nomad. Bey argues for tactical uses of technologies, including the Web, but does not feel bound by them:

“The TAZ agrees with the hackers because it wants to come into being--in part--through the Net, even through the mediation of the Net. But it also agrees with the greens because it retains intense awareness of itself as body and feels only revulsion for CyberGnosis, the attempt to transcend the body through instantaneity and simulation. The TAZ tends to view the Tech/anti-Tech dichotomy as misleading, like most dichotomies, ...” (TAZ)

So a Whitmanian pragmatism, a choosing of both body and soul, nature and artifact seems to be at work here. The “Temporary” attribute in the TAZ acronym is particularly apt for the Internet Age, where websites can flower for an hour or a year, only to disappear into the void of the matrix. But, it can legitimately be objected, Whitman was not interested in anything temporary—he clearly wanted his *Leaves* to be enduring. The Dada notion of “throwaway art” would have been completely foreign to him. On the contrary, *Leaves of*

Grass is an exercise in willed permanence, a cryogenic capsule intended to orbit the earth for centuries.

That being acknowledged, Whitman's autonomous zone is temporary in a couple of ways. First, the homophobia of his day required that he proceed by indirection, as in his references to the Calamus and manly love, so he had to employ the hit-and-run guerrilla strategies characteristic of a TAZ. Second, though *Leaves of Grass* is enduring, each generation selects its own Whitman, a usable poet for particular purposes (like Pound's famous pact, or Williams's incorporations in Paterson, or Ginsberg's "old courage teacher" or the noncanonical poems Robert Creeley chose for his *Selected Whitman* or my colleague Sam Abrams highlighted in the *Neglected Whitman*).

During his lifetime, of course, *Leaves of Grass* was constantly evolving, subject to editorial revisions and printing alterations overseen by the poet. After his death, this process of change continued, with a plethora of different Whitmans out there—the little pocket version that Socialist organizers like the young Carl Sandburg carried, the Popular Front realist aesthetics of Rockwell Kent's woodcuts in the 1936 Heritage Press edition, the Modern Library edition, and so on.

Today, we have electronic media that give us new forms to encounter Whitman, including rival editions and websites. As Google lists one million, four hundred eighty thousand sites related to Walt Whitman, there are indeed many Whitmans to encounter! Preeminent among these are the Walt Whitman Archive from the University of Virginia and the electronic edition of *The Mickle Street Review*. Poet Jim Cohn's Beat-oriented Museum of

American Poetics (Poetspath.com) is another example, as is the Whitman page at the Academy of American Poetry site, The Library of Congress page for the Thomas B. Harned Collection, The Walt Whitman Arts Center site, the Walt Whitman Birthplace site, etc.

How do the Whitmans we meet there differ or find continuity with the Whitmans found in print versions of *Leaves of Grass*? How does the medium change the messenger? One area that challenges static representations of Whitman are collaborative Internet sites like poetry web rings (where members link their homepages to each other's), blogs (Web journals), and wikis ("a website that allows users to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows anyone to edit the content"--Wikipedia). Such a notion, I think, would have appealed to Walt's Quaker "every man a poet" sensibilities, though his protectiveness towards craft and reputation would have made him ultimately recoil.

The Wikipedia (or wiki encyclopedia), entry on Walt Whitman http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman is a case in point. Main entries are on the poet's Life, Poetry and Influence, Whitman and Homosexuality, Important Events in Whitman's Life, Further Reading, and External Links (including one to the Hypertext Whitman). A button accompanies each section, inviting the reader to edit the selection. *Leaves of Grass* is given its own listing, cross-referenced from the Walt Whitman page, and includes chapter titles, brief sample (from "I Sing the Body Electric," not surprisingly), and chronology.

So anyone can be an instant Whitman scholar in this most democratic of media, though there is a failsafe mechanism of sorts, as others can change your comments back to the original, or to something completely different. The idea is that a consensus will eventually win

out.

Yet, there is a danger that it won't, or that an entry on a less famous subject might be dominated by a particular interest group, the way Lyndon LaRouche crazies flood the Web with conspiracy theories about the original Cybernetics group or their own version of the importance of Friedrich Schiller (given Whitman's inclination to write his own reviews, Wikipedia might have kept him quite busy!). There is also the danger of computer zones being too temporary, a tendency Social Computing expert Elizabeth Lawley calls "the unbearable impermanence of blogging":

My biggest frustration with blogging is definitely the way that ideas and issues raised in blogs seem to disappear from everyone's radar within days. Blogs encourage a "topic du jour" approach to the world. Once the discussion scrolls off the main page, it might as well never have happened. The swarm of readers is off in search of the newest idea high.
http://mamamusings.net/archives/2003/09/21/the_unbearable_impermanence_of_blogging.php

But Walt has been around long enough to not have to worry about being the poet du jour, and so it is very likely that his presence in cyberspace will prove both enduring and salutary. Certainly he has been fortunate in having one of the premier literary websites, the Hypertext Archive, devoted to his legacy. And if hypertext theorist Stuart Moulthrop is correct about the electronic writing space creating "a new community of readers, writers, and designers of media" (266), then Traubel's old dream of "Succession," "Reaching through me, through others through me, through all at last, our brothers, / A hand to the future"(Conservator 5 June 1894: 57) might come true. Let a thousand TAZ's bloom!

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