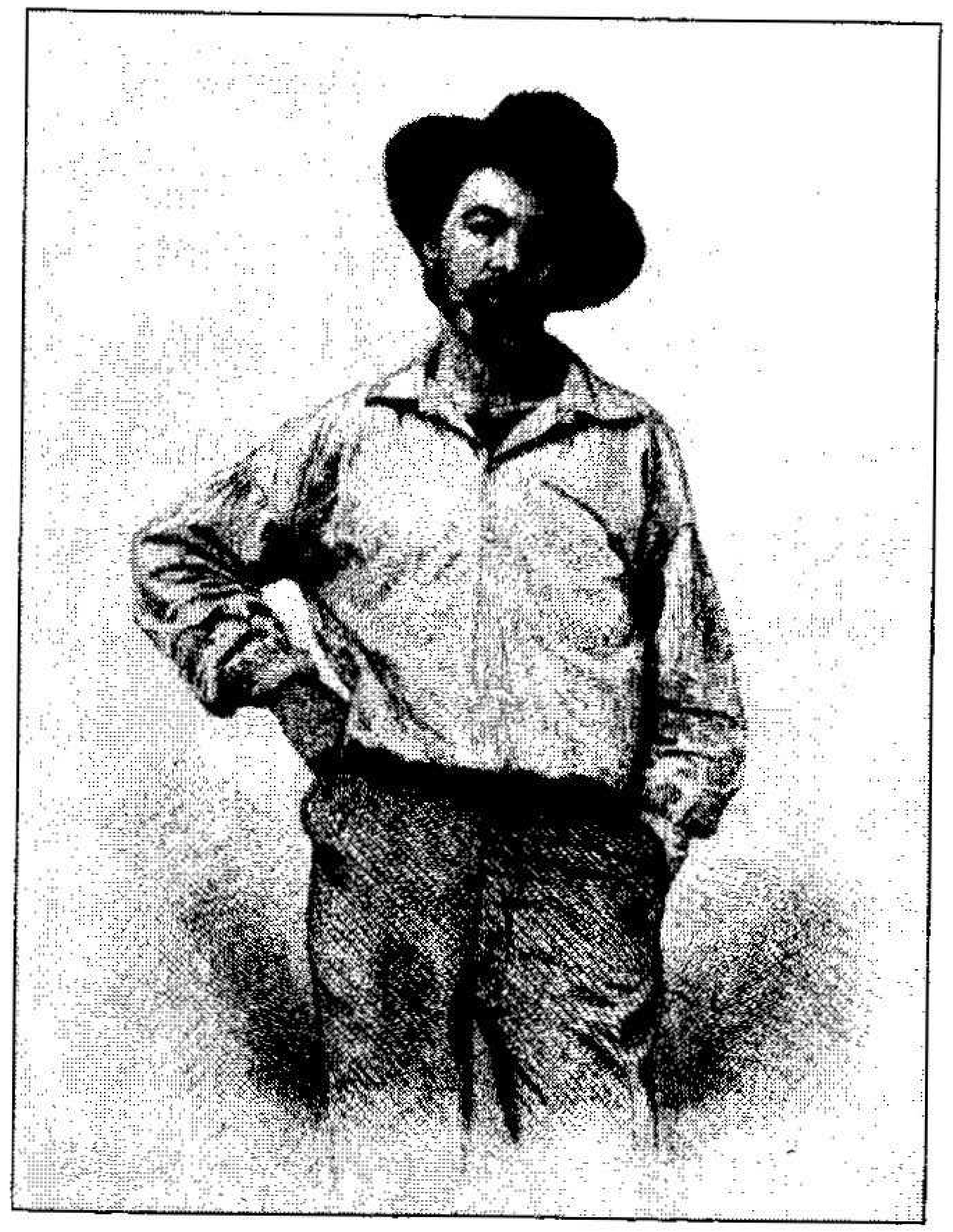
# 1. From *Leaves of Grass* to the Brooklyn Bridge: The Rise of the Queer Waterfront, 1855–83

On the afternoon of July 4, 1855, Walter Whitman was a lithe but graying thirty-six-year-old hurrying through the busy streets of Brooklyn on his way to immortality. Most days he strolled leisurely through the hurly-burly crowds, stopping to chat with any strapping stevedore or intriguing young clerk who caught his eye, but today he moved with purpose. Nothing would put him off, not the flat gray sky of an incipient summer storm, nor the slippery surface of Brooklyn's cobblestoned streets, nor even the pleasure of raising a glass to America's birthday with some handsome man in a ramshackle sailor saloon. Whitman's destination? A two-story, redbrick printer's shop at the corner of Cranberry and Fulton Streets, run by the Rome brothers. He was picking up the very first printing of his first book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass.* All spring he'd worked in the convivial atmosphere of the shop, assembling the text, choosing the fonts, and even typesetting some of the pages himself. Now the book was done, and with it, he would etch two names on the ledger of history, forever linking their fame to each other: *Whitman* and *Brooklyn*.



Walt Whitman in the engraved frontispiece from *Leaves of Grass*, by Samuel Hollyer, 1854.

Whitman was not yet known as a poet, or, really, as much of anything. The engraved frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass* shows a sturdy man with a trim graying beard. He wears a black hat but no belt; his gaze is direct; and his right fist sits jauntily on his hip. His demeanor has the air of a provocateur, as though he were about to cock an eyebrow and ask, "Well?" In an anonymous review of *Leaves of Grass* (almost certainly written by Whitman himself), he was described as being

> *of pure American breed, large and lusty—age thirty-six years, (1855,)—never once using medicine—never dressed in black, always dressed freely and clean in strong clothes neck open, shirt-collar flat and broad, countenance tawny transparent red, beard well-mottled with white, hair like hay after it has been mowed in the field and lies tossed and streaked—his physiology corroborating a rugged phrenology—a spirit that mixes cheerfully with the world—a person singularly beloved and looked toward, especially by young men and the illiterate.*[1]

And that love, according to *Leaves of Grass,* was amply returned.

Born on Long Island in 1819, Whitman was raised in Brooklyn and returned there at the age of twenty-six. As an adult, he bounced from job to job, including schoolteacher, journalist, publisher of an abolitionist paper, keeper of a print shop, and house builder. He liked long walks on the city's teeming streets and in Brooklyn's rural countryside and had a particular fondness for swimming naked in the streams, ponds, and beaches that dotted its landscape. He loved the opera, the ocean, and the ruddy young men who flooded the city looking for work. In the evenings, he liked to carouse at Pfaff's, a basement bar in Manhattan that was a candlelit version of CBGB—the hottest hangout for the city's most outré artists. But Whitman's early writings consisted mostly of dry editorials and the occasional stilted story. *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle,* which Whitman published in serial form in 1853, is fairly typical of his early output. It begins:

> *Punctually at half past 12, the noon-day sun shining flat on the pavement of Wall street, a youth with the pious name of Nathaniel, clapt upon his closely cropt head, a straw hat, for which he had that very morning given the sum of twenty-five cents, and announced his intention of going to his dinner.*[2]

Despite its having some pleasing rhythm—"clapt upon his closely cropt head"—no one would ever mistake Whitman for a novelist. His stories were too moralizing and fussy, and they dealt timidly with things of little importance. When that first copy of *Leaves of Grass* was printed, it would be as dissimilar to Whitman's

other writings as it was to nearly *all* other writing at the time. It was new, brashly and brazenly so—a "barbaric yawp," as its creator termed it, written in free verse. At the time, most American poets wrote with formal meter and rhyme. By breaking with this tradition, Whitman rendered *Leaves of Grass* more conversational and accessible to a wide range of readers. With it, he answered a challenge from one of the foremost American writers of his day, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist author of "Self-Reliance." More than a decade earlier, Emerson had written an essay entitled "The Poet," which declared that America had produced no great poets as of yet. What defined this new genius according to Emerson?

> *The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet. . . .*
>
> *The poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's. . . .*
>
> *I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await.*[3]

Before 1855, no one would have guessed that the unprepossessing Walter Whitman from Huntington, Long Island, would be the poet for whom Emerson waited. Within just weeks of publication, however, Emerson would proclaim *Leaves of Grass* "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," full of "incomparable things said incomparably well." Many critics agreed, with the magazine *Life Illustrated* raving, "It is like no other book that ever was written."[4] But some saw a moral darkness in Whitman's work, "a degrading, beastly sensuality," as a reviewer in *The Criterion* called it.[5] Its poems celebrated the wondrous diversity of life in Brooklyn, the technological marvels of the nineteenth century, the natural beauty of America, and (for those in the know) love between men. It was so popular that Whitman printed a new version in 1856—and in 1860, '67, '71, '76, '81, '88, and '92.

Perhaps just as surprising as the sudden emergence of Whitman as a great poet was that he lived in Brooklyn. Although it was still a city in its own right—not yet a satellite borough to Manhattan—Brooklyn, like Whitman, had only just begun to come into its own. Originally spelled *Breukelen,* it was one of the six Dutch settlements created on the western edge of Long Island in the mid-1600s. At the turn of the nineteenth century, it was a farming hamlet of just six thousand residents, but by 1855, it had incorporated the nearby towns of Williamsburg and Bushwick to become an urban enclave of some two hundred thousand souls. According to Mayor George Hall, by annexing the other two towns, Brooklyn had become "the second city of the Empire," after Manhattan. Mayor Hall numbered among Brooklyn's virtues some nineteen thousand buildings, five hundred streets, thirty-seven hundred public lamps (twenty-six hundred of which used gas!), and eight and a half miles of industrious waterfront. Brooklyn possessed such incredible resources, wrote Mayor Hall, that no one could "set bounds on [its] future greatness."[6] After the publication of *Leaves of Grass,* the same could be said for Walt Whitman.

The pulsing heart of this new American city was the Fulton Ferry landing, just a few blocks from the Rome brothers' print shop, where dozens of steamboats hauled passengers and supplies in an endless loop between the sister cities, Brooklyn and Manhattan. Here, the sounds of lapping water and hungry gulls provided a constant backdrop to the polyglot shouts of sailors, the creaking of carriage wheels, and the heavy thuds of an endless stream of cargo being unloaded. Anyone looking for passage across the East River had to take the ferry, which made for unparalleled people-watching. Within just a few minutes, you could encounter wealthy Quaker women heading to Manhattan in horse-drawn carriages, Filipino cooks buying provisions for ships docked down in Red Hook, boisterous young sailors on leave from the navy, and tweed-suited titans of industry investigating their goods with monocled eyes. These variegated multitudes provided Whitman with an "impalpable sustenance," an endless chance to marvel at the greatness of the world.[7] Perhaps just as important, the ferry provided an endless chance to marvel at the greatness of young men.

Whitman immortalized the vitality of the Fulton Ferry landing in his poem "Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry," which contains perhaps the first description of cruising in American literature. Whitman wrote of loving those "who look back on me because I look'd forward to them"—a poetic invocation of the backward

glance that is often the first step in the delicate business of expressing clandestine desire. Later in the poem, the object of that glance is made clear, as Whitman recalls the "loud voices of young men" hailing him in the streets, and how he

> *Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh*
> *against me as I sat,*
> *Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them*
> *a word*[8]

As surely as *Leaves of Grass* linked Whitman and Brooklyn for eternity, lines such as these indelibly connected Whitman to the generations of queer people who would come after him, people for whom urban life—Brooklyn life—provided the opportunity to express desires that were largely incompatible with the agrarian, family-based culture that predominated in America before the mid-nineteenth century. For the next hundred years, the development of Brooklyn would neatly track with the development of our modern ideas of sexuality. Whitman stands like a beacon at the beginning of both—a beacon located squarely on the waterfront, the economic engine that powered Brooklyn. To understand queer Brooklyn, or Brooklyn at all, you have to start with the water.

Brooklyn's sudden transformation from farm town to "second city of the Empire" can be traced to one waterway in particular: the Erie Canal, which connected the upper Hudson River to Lake Erie, the gateway to the West. When the canal opened in 1825, it immediately redefined trade in America. According to *The Erie Canal: A Brief History,* "within 15 years of the Canal's opening, New York was the busiest port in America, moving tonnages greater than Boston, Baltimore and New Orleans combined."[9] The canal also redrew the map of the state: nearly every major modern city in New York today is along the route of the canal. As the terminus of this great trade, New York City was perhaps the single most important shipping location in the world. In just the year after the canal opened, five hundred new mercantile companies were launched in the city.[10]

There was just one problem: By the mid-1830s, the city's harbor was maxed out. Dense lower Manhattan simply had no room for the docks, warehouses, and other attendant industries that all of this new trade needed. Moreover, many of the piers were in poor condition, having gone unmaintained for years.[11] Land speculators in Brooklyn rushed to fill this gap, starting in Red Hook (a neighborhood entirely along the waterfront, which is today mostly known for having NYC's only IKEA). According to Joseph Alexiou's *Gowanus: Brooklyn's Curious Canal,* one of the first groups to try to capitalize on the need for more shipping space was the Red Hook Building Company. In an internal memo from 1838, they wrote that the new shipping businesses coming to the city

> *cannot, with convenience, intermix with the shipping at the crowded docks of New York . . . they require space. They must have coal yards and warehouses in the immediate vicinity of their docks. Where shall they go? Where can they go but Brooklyn?*[12]

Unfortunately, their plan went nowhere, but soon the Atlantic Dock Company succeeded where the Red Hook Building Company had failed. In 1846, they turned forty-two acres of marshy Red Hook coastland into the Atlantic Docks, which included dozens of piers, bulkheads, docks, warehouses, and one of the first steam-powered grain elevators in America. The basin they created could house one hundred ships at a time, turning Brooklyn into an "international center of commerce."[13] The growth in trade created a bevy of new jobs, ranging from unskilled hauling to highly specialized shipbuilding. By the mid-1800s, Brooklyn was one of the leading manufacturers in the country for a wide range of products, from sugar, to rope, to white lead, to whiskey.[14]

This new industrial waterfront created the conditions that allowed queer lives to flourish in Brooklyn. As America transitioned away from a primarily farming economy, the extended family—once the main economic unit in the country—began to lose importance. New urban jobs allowed (some) people in Brooklyn to carve out separate space for themselves, far from their parents or anyone who knew them. Victorian culture mandated strict separations between men and women, meaning that most of these jobs were either all-male or all-female. Huge numbers of immigrants, mostly unaccompanied men, came to New York to meet this demand for laborers, creating large working-class bachelor subcultures where heterosexual sex (outside of prostitution) could be hard to find. The trading routes that created these jobs didn't just move goods, however; they also moved people and ideas—meaning that the average Brooklyn laborer had much greater exposure to other cultures (and their sexual mores) than did most other Americans. Many of these new Brooklyn residents were transient, living in the city only seasonally or for a few years at a time, enabling them to settle in these raucous neighborhoods with relative anonymity. Finally, since shipping and manufacturing were dirty endeavors, waterfront neighborhoods were often undesirable, inexpensive, and only lightly policed. One of the few drawbacks to Brooklyn cited by Mayor Hall in 1855 was that its police lacked the "qualifications and fitness for office."[15] Thus, Brooklyn's waterfront offered the density, privacy, diversity, and economic possibility that would allow queer people to find one another in ever-increasing numbers (though these freedoms would not be enjoyed equally by all queer people). The waterfront was no monolith, however, and different parts of it offered different opportunities, to different communities, in different eras. But by the time Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass,* the areas that offered the most support to the earliest queer communities in Brooklyn were already established neighborhoods drawing new residents from around the world.

A visitor to Brooklyn in 1855 would step off the ferry onto Old Fulton Street, which roughly bisected the city. To the east was low-lying Vinegar Hill, a working-class, dockside neighborhood with a large Irish population. The area was a warren of poorly constructed, tightly packed row houses and dirty businesses, filled with the sharp smells of varnish being manufactured and iron being smelted. Bootlegging was a major business in Vinegar Hill, from small-scale home distilleries making poteen, or Irish moonshine, to industrial-size whiskey and rum operations. These illegal establishments were so prominent that when the federal government tried to clamp down on them for tax purposes in 1870, it had to flood the neighborhood with more than two thousand soldiers, in a series of pitched battles known as the Whiskey Wars.[16]

Vinegar Hill was bordered to the south by Sands Street, an important thoroughfare that connected Old Fulton Street with the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which sat on the western edge of Vinegar Hill. The yard was the city's most important military base and the largest navy yard in the country, a sprawling complex that was home to innumerable sailors. Inaugurated in 1801 by President John Adams, the yard was a center for early American shipbuilding, military education, and technological innovation. In 1815, the first steam-powered warship, the USS *Fulton,* was built here, and the Naval Lyceum (the precursor to the US Naval Academy) was founded here in 1833. By Whitman's time, some six thousand men were employed in the Navy Yard's nearly two-hundred-acre campus.

If a visitor continued east, a few miles farther out was Weeksville, a small town that was the only majority-black community in Brooklyn. By all accounts, Weeksville was a semirural enclave of "steep hills, deep valleys, and woodlands," which was about ten minutes from the ferry via the Long Island Rail Road. Founded in 1838, by 1855 Weeksville had over five hundred residents (about 20 percent of the entire black population of Brooklyn at the time). It served as "the center of organized recreational activities for African-Americans from the entire region," according to Judith Wellman, author of *Brooklyn's Promised Land: The Free Black Community of Weeksville, New York*. Weeksville was "one of the two largest independent free Black communities in the United States," a place where "people generally lived in safety, supported themselves financially, educated their children . . . and set up their own churches."[17] As one of the few majority-black areas in all of New York City, it served as an incubator for black political and religious organizing and a needed refuge in times of racial unrest and antiblack rioting. After a visitor passed Weeksville, the rest of eastern Brooklyn was lightly settled farmland, still crisscrossed with pastoral streams and woods, until one reached the newly incorporated town of Bushwick (formerly the Dutch town Boswjick).

If, on the other hand, a visitor disembarked from the ferry and followed Old Fulton Street to the south, they would find the land quickly rising beneath them to create high bluffs with panoramic Manhattan views. Just a few blocks into town they would encounter the Rome brothers' print shop, one of the bustling businesses where the working waterfront edged into the more residential neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights. A few blocks farther south, wealthy families were already building the Greek Revival–style town houses that earned the Heights the label "America's first suburb."[18] The area on the other side of Old Fulton Street, opposite Brooklyn Heights, would eventually be downtown Brooklyn, the city's civic center.

Farther south still, the city gave way to the industrial basin of Red Hook and the Gowanus Creek, an as-of-yet-unimportant inlet of the New York City harbor. Nearby were the gentle hills, streams, and farmland that would one day be the neighborhoods of Park Slope and Sunset Park. Finally, a long carriage ride south from Fulton Ferry would bring you to the oceanfront resorts of Coney Island, which was primarily an escape for the middle class and the wealthy. Here, hotels dotted the sandy ocean shores, giving the impression of a distant seaside holiday just a few miles from the bustle of downtown Brooklyn.

For as long as these waterfront areas were economically successful (or until about the early 1950s), they enabled working-class people to create enclaves of queer life. These groupings were often small, sub rosa, isolated, and temporary, but they formed the nucleus for the later emergence of what we would recognize as gay communities. In the queer history of these areas, five waterfront jobs reoccur again and again: sailor, artist, sex worker, entertainer, and female factory worker. Each of these jobs had particular conditions that made them more available or desirable to queer people. Sailors have always been a symbol of escape from small towns, and their long voyages, marked by single-sex isolation and exposure to different cultures around the world, provided great opportunity for sexual and gender experimentation. Artists were often given leeway to be "eccentric," and the Brooklyn waterfront drew them with its cheap rents (and—to be honest—with its cheap sailors). Sex workers (male, female, and transgender) had ready clients, and few observers, in the dockside alleys and waterfront brothels of Vinegar Hill and Red Hook. Freaks and entertainers, particularly those who were gender nonconforming, found lucrative (if often exploitative) work in the vaudeville theaters of downtown Brooklyn and the sideshows of Coney Island. Finally, in the lead-up to World War II, female factory workers broke gender stereotypes and provided lesbians with previously unimaginable freedoms.

Given the prevalence of these jobs in mid-nineteenth-century Brooklyn, it's unlikely that Walt Whitman was the first person to develop a queer community there. However, unlike those in the other jobs listed above, artists are often given a greater level of respect—and place in our cultural memory—than their incomes would otherwise generally afford them. Also, at a time when few people were inclined or encouraged to record their innermost thoughts, artists such as Whitman were pushed to do so. Additionally, your average artist's behavior was (somewhat) less policed than that of your average businessman, who had both customers and coworkers to worry about. In other words, artists had a *slightly* better chance of being able to live a queer life, a *slightly* better chance of recording that life, and a *slightly* better chance of having that record preserved. For all of these reasons, Whitman provides a good access point to the beginnings of queer life in Brooklyn.

One of the great things about Whitman is the tantalizing hints he left behind pointing to the existence of a subculture of working-class white men who loved other men. Many of these were laborers that he met while walking along the docks, or taking the ferry, or going for a bracing swim in the ocean. In his daybook, Whitman kept lists of these men, mostly single-line entries commenting on their looks, personalities, and family relationships. A typical snippet from one such catalog, written around the time of *Leaves of Grass,* reads:

> Gus White (25) at Ferry with skeleton boat with Walt Baulsir—(5 ft 9 round—well built)
> Timothy Meighan (30) Irish, oranges, Fulton & Concord
> James Dalton (Engine-Williamsburgh)
> Charley Fisher (26) 5th av. (hurt, diseased, deprived)
> Ike (5th av.) 28—fat, drinks, rode "Fashion" in the great race
> Jack (4th av) tall slender, had the French pox [syphilis]

This particular list goes on for *over fifteen pages,* with almost no women included (and those that are mentioned are never physically described).[19] It's impossible to know how many of these men were receptive to advances Whitman made, but some of the entries certainly suggest they were, such as this one: "David Wilson night of Oct 11, '62, walking up from Middagh—slept with me—works in a blacksmith shop in Navy Yard."[20]

These were the "young men and the illiterate" whom Whitman was beloved by. They embodied his twin virtues of health and manly comradeship. *Leaves of Grass* was inspired by them, written for them, and often talked directly about them. Or as Whitman put it in "Song of Myself":

> *The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me well,*
> *The woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with him all day,*
> *The farm-boy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice,*
> *In vessels that sail my words sail, I go with fishermen and seamen and love them.*

That love was not just platonic. Foremost among the "new experiences" that Whitman would chaunt and yawp into the American literary canon was the urban life of a man who loved other men, and who was able to bring together those similarly inclined. Men loving men was not something new, as Whitman was well aware from his studies in ancient Greek. But the idea that these men constituted a specific type of person, that they could define themselves by this love and carve out space to gather together as lovers of other men—what we would today call the idea of "being gay"—didn't yet exist in Whitman's world. The word *homosexual* wouldn't even be coined until 1868.

*Leaves of Grass* was written at the height of the Victorian era, which lasted from approximately 1840 to 1900. Socially, this was a relatively conservative time, but one that saw huge advances in industry and urbanization. During his life, Whitman witnessed the invention of everything from the telephone, to the photograph, to the flushing indoor toilet, to ice cream. Advances in farming, manufacturing, communication, and transportation enabled a vast population flux into cities around the country. In 1840, barely 10 percent of Americans lived in urban places; by 1900 that number had skyrocketed to 40 percent.[21]

According to Victorian morality, women and men inhabited complementary but separate worlds. Men were rational, active, and in the public eye; women were emotional, passive, and limited to the domestic sphere of family and home. Proper women were asexual and acted as a limiting force on the "animal instincts" of men. White Victorians saw all black men and women as inherently lesser; although New York State had abolished slavery by 1855, it was still the law of the land in many places. And even in free states such as New York, black people lived under tremendous constraints (legal and extralegal) on whom they could love, what jobs they could have, and where they could live. When *Leaves of Grass* was first printed, New York City's entire black population was around twelve thousand people.[22] Few whites—even those who opposed slavery, such as Whitman—believed in true racial equality.

Due to these divisions, New York was "an intensely homosocial city," according to the epic city history *Gotham*—a place where white men "clubbed, ate, drank, rioted, whored, paraded, and politicked together, clustered together in boardinghouses and boards of directors, [and] even slept together."[23] Aside from time with your own family, interactions between men and women were limited (particularly among the middle and upper classes). People of color lived mostly in small, segregated, and remote neighborhoods such as Weeksville, far from the economic and social centers of town. For Whitman, this meant that he lived in rooming houses that were full of white men; worked in print shops and newsrooms that were entirely staffed by white men; ate lunch in cheap oyster houses where the majority of patrons were white men; and in the evenings did his drinking and reveling in saloons that rarely admitted women or people of color.

It almost goes without saying that in a world so divided by sex (the identity), that sex (the act) was treated as a dangerous mystery. Sex education was mostly limited to what a child might observe among livestock or glean from older children (as it still is in many places today). Although Victorians are often remembered solely as prudes, they spent huge amounts of time considering and classifying kinds of sex. Sexual attraction to a person of the same sex was considered a disorder of gender, closer to what we today think of as "being transgender" than "being gay." Sexual acts between members of the same sex were stigmatized and lumped together with other nonprocreative forms of sex under the name *sodomy,* which could include anything from masturbation, to bestiality, to hetero- or homosexual oral sex. Legally, however, sodomy charges (sometimes called the crime against nature) were primarily used in cases of sexual assault, and not against consensual sex acts. At the time of the 1880 census, only sixty-three people were imprisoned on sodomy charges *in the entire country,* and only five of those in New York.[24] The idea that people had a fixed, inborn set of sexual desires that were permanent and could be used to classify humanity into groups was only just emerging among theorists in Europe. There was little agreed-upon language to even discuss those feelings.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out in his essay, the job of the poet is that of language-maker, the person who documents and names the new experiences of the times. What makes Whitman so memorable isn't his private desires, but his realization that those desires were shared by others, and his attempt to create or memorialize words, rituals, and experiences that these men shared—something he certainly could not have done in isolation. In *Leaves of Grass,* Whitman called these men his "comrades" or "camerados." Their affection for one another he dubbed "adhesiveness." To symbolize that love, he chose the simple calamus plant, a sturdy river reed with long vertical leaves and a protruding, phallic flower cone. Whitman wrote forty-five "Calamus poems" celebrating the love between men. He explicitly urged others to use the plant as a queer love token in Calamus #4, writing:

*And here what I now draw from the water, wading in the pond-side,*
*(O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me—and returns again, never to separate from me,*
*And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades—this calamus-root shall,*

*Interchange it, youths, with each other! Let none render it back!)*
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
*But what I drew from the water by the pond-side, that I reserve,*
*I will give of it—but only to them that love, as I myself am capable of loving.*

Why did Whitman choose the calamus as his gift to "them that love, as I myself am capable of loving"? Calamus was wild in Brooklyn, appearing in the very places where Whitman met his camerados. It grew on the banks of the streams where young farmers brought their livestock to drink; it dotted the marshy coast where sailors hunted for duck in between stints at sea; and it lined the secluded watering holes where salt-crusted stevedores went to wash off the day's labor. Its phallic shape was suggestive, but so were ears of corn, were it just a matter of form. But the calamus had an added bonus: its name was an allusion to the ancient Greek myth of a pair of young male lovers, Kalamos and Karpos, who died during a swimming competition. Whitman's Calamus poems comprise some of his most sensual and personal poetry. Over the next hundred years, this inclination to find "them that love, as I myself am capable of loving," was a consistent hallmark of early queer pioneers.

However, cruising the waterfront wasn't the only way that Whitman met other men. *Leaves of Grass* was not only a proclamation, it was an invitation: a love letter set afloat in the world to see who understood it and answered its call. The third poem in the book—"In Cabin'd Ships at Sea"—explicitly says this in its last stanza:

*Then falter not, O book! Fulfil your destiny!*
*You, not a reminiscence of the land alone,*
*You too, as a lone bark, cleaving the ether—purpos'd I know*
*not whither—yet ever full of faith,*
*Consort to every ship that sails—sail you!*
*Bear forth to them, folded, my love—(Dear mariners! For you I fold it here, in every leaf;)*
*Speed on, my Book! Spread your white sails, my little bark, athwart the imperious waves!*
*Chant on—sail on—bear o'er the boundless blue, from me, to every shore,*
*This song for mariners and all their ships.*

The ability to gather people to him with his words was one of the other qualities that Emerson enumerated a genius poet would possess, writing that "by truth and by his art . . . [he] will draw all men sooner or later."[25] This was certainly true for Whitman. In his lifetime, men such as Oscar Wilde and Edward Carpenter (an early English proponent of gay rights) flocked to Whitman's door, asking questions about the poet's sexuality, which he was loath to answer. Many later queer artists would be drawn to Brooklyn because of the city's association with Whitman. Hart Crane, the 1920s poet whose foremost muse was the Brooklyn Bridge, addressed Whitman and his legacy of "adhesiveness" directly in his poem "Cape Hatteras," writing, "O Walt!—Ascensions of thee hover in me now. . . . Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood!" A decade later, modernist poets Chester Kallman and Harold Norse would cite both Whitman *and* Crane among the reasons they wanted to study at Brooklyn College. In the mid-twentieth century, playwright Tennessee Williams, editor George Davis, and novelist Carson McCullers were all inspired to move to Brooklyn partially because of their love for Crane and Whitman.

McCullers notwithstanding, however, this list of Whitman devotees makes one thing obvious. Whitman's appeal was primarily pitched to and received by queer people who were like him: white, male, cisgender artists. While Whitman professed a love of all people and believed in freedom and equality for men and women, black and white, he was rather disinterested in people who were *not* white men. He referred to black people as "darkeys" who were "superstitious, ignorant, [and] thievish," though "full of good nature,"[26] and he seemed surprised when women were interested in *Leaves of Grass,* since it was so from and for a male perspective.[27]

While Whitman's personal prejudices limited his appeal primarily to white men, larger structural forces also kept women and people of color away from Brooklyn's waterfront and its opportunities for exploring queer life (at least, they did for a while). Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* before the Civil War, and though slavery had been outlawed in New York in 1827, black communities were still isolated, small, and marginalized. Until 1940, Brooklyn's population never dipped below 96 percent white, and in 1855 it had just four thousand black residents total. The period immediately surrounding the Civil War was particularly harsh for New York City's black population, which declined steadily from 1840 to 1870. At this time "white supremacist ideology ruled the city," according to Dr. Carla Peterson, author of *Black Gotham.*[28] Brooklyn was particularly bad. For example, in 1860 New York State contemplated a law granting universal male suffrage, which would have given all black men the right to vote with no property-ownership requirements. Statewide, only 38 percent of voters supported the measure—and in Brooklyn, that number dwindled to a pitiful 20 percent.[29] The *Brooklyn City News* was blunt in its racist disparagement of the law, suggesting that it would determine "whether ten or fifteen thousand sooty Negroes shall be raised" to equality with white men.[30] After the end of the Civil War in 1865, New York City's black population would again begin to rise, but Brooklyn would remain more conservative and less diverse than Manhattan.

This political disenfranchisement went hand in hand with economic barriers against people of color. Just as Brooklyn's waterfront started to grow, black people began to be pushed out of dockside jobs. In 1835, 14 percent of sailors on outbound ships from New York City were black; by 1866, that number would decline to 4.5 percent.[31] Even for black people who did find work in ships out of Brooklyn, many "found their options limited to occupations such as cooks or stewards," according to *Black Jacks,* a history of black sailors.[32] Certain waterfront jobs—such as longshoreman—were already dominated by the Irish, who often locked out black workers in an effort to use racism to help them assimilate into a city that was deeply suspicious of their poverty, lack of education, high birth rates, and Catholicism.[33] To many Americans, the Irish were barely white themselves. By keeping black people down, these new immigrants ensured they were not on society's lowest rung.

Understanding this legacy of racial exclusion is critical to understanding the development of queer history and community in Brooklyn. Although there undoubtedly were black people with queer desires in the city's early years, they don't show up in historical records until right before the beginning of the twentieth century. Even when they do, it's clear that Brooklyn was a more complicated space for early queer people of color. Many seemed to experience the city as an archipelago of safer spaces, dividing their time between its far-flung black neighborhoods, its burgeoning queer areas, and those places where the two overlapped (such as Harlem in the 1920s). Some found employment in majority-black neighborhoods, while living in tony Brooklyn Heights or densely packed Vinegar Hill. Others worked along the waterfront but lived in distant black communities such as Harlem or Weeksville.

the end of the century in Camden, New Jersey. With the war's end in 1865, the queer history of Brooklyn's waterfront began to diversify. For people of color, the end of the war meant the end of de jure slavery, and an increase in self-determination, political power, mobility, and economic possibility. From 1870 on, the number of people of color living in Brooklyn would rise every decade. But the Civil War also had profound effects on white women. Some took part in the war as nurses, spies, or disguised soldiers, and many more had to take over the responsibilities of drafted husbands, fathers, and brothers (just as tens of thousands of Brooklyn women would during World War I, and hundreds of thousands would during World War II). Over thirty thousand Brooklyn men participated in the Civil War.[39] For the women who remained at home, maintaining the separate sphere mandated by Victorian morality was less important than keeping food on the table, and many went to work outside the home for the first time. It's no coincidence that the 1870 census was the first to ask about women's work, finding that 13.3 percent of women over the age of ten were gainfully employed.[40]

# notes

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