

IN REALITY MEAGER: ELUDING DEATH ANXIETY IN WALT WHITMAN
AND FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA'S POETICS OF THE BODY

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ABSTRACT

Christopher Maurer, a leading biographer and critic of Federico Garcia Lorca, describes the Spaniard's *Poet in New York* using the adjective "Whitman-esque." Indeed, the poet's posthumous collection lambasts the rampant materialism and putrid urbanization of New York through extensive divergent shifts in style and tone from Lorca's earlier work that point toward the influence of Walt Whitman: radical line lengths, exclamatory prose, and lengthy catalogues. This study proposes that the influence of Whitman upon Lorca is more than cosmetic or strictly imitative. Using the writings of the American anthropologist Ernest Becker as a methodology, I propose that further similarities between Whitman and Lorca can be found in their psychological reactions to death anxiety, as exemplified in their poems on the body. While Whitman imagines achieving immortality through construction of a transcendentalist "over-soul," Lorca envisions an unending dance with death through the Andalusian ideology of "duende." Through analysis of the poet's body, the homosexual body, and the African-American body, I identify the means through which Whitman and Lorca downplay their fears of mortality.

DEDICATION

To my students: past, present and future.

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Chapter 1
The Problem of Mortality

“A dead man in Spain is more alive as a dead man than anyplace else in the world.”
Federico Garcia Lorca, “Play and Theory of the Duende.”

Walt Whitman’s contemporary status as an icon among not only literary critics but popular readers belies the fact that at the time of his death, the poet was largely considered a failure¹. While some critics were enthralled by Whitman’s conflagration of nation, self, and poetry, just as many found the work vulgar and antithetical to the established criteria of “good” poetry. In a 2007 unearthing, the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* published sixty-eight previously uncollected reviews of *Leaves of Grass*. Of the sixty-eight, a majority posit either mixed reactions to Whitman’s work or unabashedly negative criticisms. William Bayne, considered to be a liberal critic at the time, bluntly stated, “If I ever saw anything in print that deserved to be characterized as atrociously bad, it is the poetry of Walt Whitman” (qtd. in Barney 4). Reviewers like Bayne saw Whitman’s unique free verse as sloppy and formless and the content bloated and obscene. At the time of Whitman’s death from complications resulting from pneumonia,

¹ A continual presence in American literary studies and poetry journals, Whitman’s poems have also recently factored into the massively popular serial television program *Breaking Bad*. The poet has also been quoted in a successful advertising campaign for Levi’s blue jeans.

tuberculosis and/or cancer, his poetry had failed to become an everlasting and encompassing beacon of America.

In the same issue of the New York Times that published Whitman's obituary, a scathing review of the final revised edition of *Leaves of Grass* speaks ill of the dead. The anonymous critic crushes the notion that Whitman would see posthumous success²:

The death of Walt Whitman would have excited more discussion twenty years ago than it excites to-day about the value of his poetical works and the validity of his political theories. This is of itself significant if not conclusive. It proves that Whitman is not a growing poet ("Walt").

However, this critic and others would be quickly proven wrong as the American poet's influence extended throughout his native land and across oceans and language boundaries to reach audiences worldwide. Almost forty years after Whitman's death, a young Spaniard student at Columbia named Leon Felipe befriended the poet Federico Garcia Lorca by sharing his Spanish translations of Whitman's "Song of Myself." Lorca, a young, reserved man from the Andalucian city of Granada, admired the work with fervor. According to biographer Leslie Stainton, the young man from Spain "was moved by Whitman's struggle to forge a noble America" (220). He would later confess that America's greatest aspects, including the freedom of personal expression and utilitarian care for others, were embodied by only two men: Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman (Stainton 220). However, during his year-long stay in America, Lorca would time and time again find the promise of Whitman's work undermined by reality, an experience that

² Most of these critics mention Swinburne's famous criticism of Whitman's Eve as a "drunken apple-woman, indecently sprawling in the slush and garbage of the gutter amid the rotten refuse of her overturned fruit stall." Few point out, as W.B. Cairns does, that Swinburne's attitude on Whitman was quite conflicted, and not simply a dichotomy between elite and pedestrian as this one passage suggests (Cairns 125).

would inject a profound sense of resentment into Lorca's own poetry. Confronted daily by American excess and inequality, Lorca produced a sequence of poems inspired by a love for Whitman and a distaste for America. While not collected and published in Garcia Lorca's lifetime, in 1940, the poems would be assembled as *Poet in New York*, a book that showed marked difference from the poet's earlier imagist and minimalist poetry.

By studying selections from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Lorca's *Poet in New York* through the psychoanalytic example of American socio-anthropologist Ernest Becker, the relationship between the two poets becomes more than literary simulacra, but a shared desire to quell anxieties over death, homosexual sterility, and bodily inequality. For both poets, the body's limitations of mortality, sexuality and race interfere with their poetic ideologies that seek unity between body and soul. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker explains that anxiety over the body is a symptom of anxiety over mortality. "Man's body is a *problem* to him that has to be explained," according to Becker. "Not only his body is strange, but also its inner landscape, the memories and dreams. Man's very insides – his self – are foreign to him" (51). The root cause of mankind's fear of death is the split between the omni-imaginative mind and the frail, mortal flesh. Over the course of their lives, humanity realizes that he or she is greater than other animals due to a myriad of mental faculties that are heretofore unique to the human experience, namely, the ability to live outside the current moment through remembrance and forecasting. Yet, despite their "elevated" status, humanity is subject to the same fate of all flesh: death. In Becker's words, humankind is dual: partly "a symbolic identity that brings him sharply out of nature" but partly also "a worm and food for worms" (26). This divide causes anxiety

because of the irreconcilability of the elevated man, creator of religion, literature and art and the base animal subject to death. Becker believes that these “two dimensions of human existence – the body and the self – can never be reconciled seamlessly” (29). While some members of society turn to disciplines like religion, art, or literature to explain the separation between soul and body, poets like Whitman and Lorca instead turned to their writing to develop differing attempts to unify the two realms of body and spirit.

Therefore, this study proposes that the influence of Whitman upon Lorca is more than cosmetic or strictly imitative. To date, many scholars have written comparative analyses of the two poets, including Christopher Maurer, a leading biographer and critic of Lorca, who aptly describes the Spanish poet’s *Poet in New York* as “Whitman-esque.” Indeed, the poet’s posthumous collection of poems, lambasting the rampant materialism and putrid urbanization of New York, possesses extensive, divergent shifts in style and tone from Lorca’s earlier work that point toward the influence of Walt Whitman: radical line lengths, exclamatory prose, and lengthy catalogues. Federico Bonnadio, adhering to the similarities in the two poet’s biography, suggests that the self-conscious Lorca viewed Whitman as a heroic ideal, arguing that Lorca’s “‘Ode to Walt Whitman’ is not merely a criticism of America’s failure to live up to Whitman’s standard, but a poem about the poets’ sacrifice to poetry, truth and dignity in art in the place of reality” (166). Contrarily, John K. Walsh views “Ode to Walt Whitman” as a critique of the ideals Whitman represented, an attempt to “kill” his idol: “he [Lorca] must have thought himself something of a post-figuration of Whitman in the role of poet if not as emblem” (258). Lorca is thus positioned by these critics as the Modernist Whitman, a Jungian

mirror-shadow of the bearded poet, one who took Whitman's ambitions to encompass people and nations through poetry and altered its tone to fit the pessimism of the times.

While I agree that both historical context and biography are important in connecting Whitman and Lorca, they serve only a tangential role compared to the underlying anxiety over death and dying. Relying heavily on Becker, I propose that a deeper understanding of the relationship between Whitman and Lorca can be reached through examination of their psychological reactions to death anxiety, as exemplified in their poems on the body. While Whitman imagines achieving immortality through construction of a transcendentalist "over-soul," Lorca envisions an unending dance with death through the Andalusian ideology of "duende." Through analysis of the poet's body, the homosexual body, and the African-American body, I identify the means through which Whitman and Lorca downplay their fears of mortality.

Becker's insights on human nature provide an overarching system for analyzing Whitman and Lorca in which we discover a repressed discomfort with death that betrays their ideologies. In Becker's *The Denial of Death* and its companion text, *Escape From Evil*, Becker details his theory that the fear of death lies at the center of human experience. Death runs through all human life like a current, informing decisions and identity from the beginnings of one's life to its end. Under Becker, the similarities between Whitman and Lorca are more than formal and thematic, and their differences are deeper than language and time; the study of *Leaves of Grass* and *Poet in New York* becomes not a question of influence, but a question of how the two poets explore personal concerns of sexuality and race and how these poets cope with these bodily anxieties.

Becker believes that death permeates the human condition to such an extent that it becomes inseparable from everyday life. As Becker's essential argument, the fear of death's role as an overarching force in determining personal identity and choice aligns itself with psychoanalytic theories such as Freud's Oedipal complex and Lacan's Mirror Stage. All three theorists posit that human personality and identity are generated in the jarring shift from a protected infancy to a dangerous adolescence, and that the effects of this transition are repressed as the individual matures, subconsciously affecting personal decisions. Where Freud and Lacan find the separation from the mother as the major determinative factor, Becker finds that man is predominantly affected by a precognitive fear of an inevitable end. As he transitions into adulthood, he has "a name, a family, a play-world in a neighborhood, all clearly cut out for him. But his insides are full of nightmarish memories of impossible battles" (29). In short, Becker argues that this anxiety over mortality, the fear of death, underlies humanity's psychology. To Becker, life "boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself to the totality of experience" (49). Since all individuals are governed by this same unwelcome truth, their coping methods align themselves in socially determined forms of repression, what he terms "heroic action systems."

Whitman, Lorca, and indeed, all humanity are subject to the heroic ideals of their native cultures. To Becker, the individual realizes he or she is a meager, animalistic being at some point in their development, and this irreparable undercutting of identity causes the person to adopt the generally accepted customs of their environment. The average person, according to Becker, "learns not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and

cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him” (23). When faced with the sublime reality of man’s meagerness in the world, man has no recourse but to establish psychological defenses to heighten his sense of identity. For example, the generally accepted notion that to die for one’s country is a “noble” death proves that many cultures prize selflessness, patriotism, and bravery. By proclaiming a death as noble, cultures soften the blow of mortality and lessen their fear of their inevitable demise.

We can see the heroism of Whitman and Lorca in their actions. Whitman’s insistence that he travel to the front to find his wounded or possibly deceased brother illustrates a hope that by his physical intervention in his brother’s life, he can possibly stave off his brother’s death and his fear of his own mortality. His brother’s possible death not only traumatizes because of Whitman’s fear of loss of a brother, but because of fear of his own death. Lorca’s deep-seated attachment to his homeland of Andalusia, his rejection of American urbanization and his conflicting sexual desires all reflect a turmoil caused at its heart by a fear of death.

Becker’s theories in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil* provide an instrumental viewpoint that changes the reader’s estimation of Whitman from one of eternal optimist to struggling artist. Becker deconstructs the crisis of faith that Lorca experiences in *Poet in New York*, revealing hidden anxieties amidst the criticisms of the environment. As we have seen, Becker believes that an individual’s subconscious defenses against death expand across groups of people to form societies whose culture is based upon common definitions of heroism. The repressed fear of death ironically evokes bravery, like a scared child feigning courage. Although cultures are grouped by a

shared repression of the fear of death, that does not mean that individuals all exhibit the same actions within the heroic system. Becker finds that certain individuals within a heroic system display their heroism through differing tactics of belief in immortality.

Becker explains:

We miss the complexity of heroism if we fail to understand this point; we miss its complete grasp of the person – a grasp not only in the support of power that self-transcendence gives to him but a grasp of his whole being in joy and love. The urge to immortality is not a simple reflex of the death-anxiety but a reaching out by one's whole being toward life (152-53).

Becker not only describes the genesis of communal belief systems as a natural self-defense mechanism against death anxiety; he also explains the supposed outliers of those belief systems as individuals undoing a spiritual quest that is nonetheless derived from the same anxiety. Heroic systems are therefore not only a by-product of humanity's mutual fear of death, but a reflection of humanity's desire for eternity. The person who realizes he is a flesh and blood animal who is saddled by pathos and ethos that convinces him he is something greater; this causes man to develop belief systems that provide ersatz immortality.

Thus, while societies can be grouped together through shared heroic ideals, individuals nonetheless possess unique ways of achieving immortality. Sam Keen explains:

The disillusioned hero rejects the standardized heroics of mass culture in favor of cosmic heroism in which there is real joy in throwing off the chains of uncritical, self-defeating dependency and discovering new possibilities of choice and action and new forms of courage and endurance (xv).

In Becker's view, the majority of people within a culture adhere to an accepted heroic standard, while certain others appear to go against these values in an attempt to separate themselves from a flawed culture. This separation, however, is itself a type of repression of the death anxiety. These individuals simply trade one ideology for another that attempts to deny death in favor of illusions of immortality and individuality. Even people who acknowledge and accept death, those who actively embrace the macabre, suffer from an anxiety over mortality; their supposed embrace of death is merely a coping mechanism that helps them understand death. Such a person is "drawn precisely toward those things that make him anxious, as a way of skirting them masterfully, testing himself against them, controlling them by defying them" (Becker 56). Even a person who acknowledges death still adheres to a type of death anxiety.

In Becker's philosophy, although man and woman are all part of specific heroic action systems, there is still room for individual approaches to death anxiety. For example, Becker believes that the creative person is one who is aberrantly aware of death. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker describes the mental state of an artist, one who utilizes the fear of death to create beauty through painting, poetry or music. He writes, "The key to the creative type is that he is separated out of the common pool of shared meanings. There is something in his life experience that makes him take in the world as a *problem*; as a result he has to make personal sense out of it" (171). To Becker, the artist is a person who is blessed/cursed with a greater sense of self-awareness; he has a desire to not fit in with the mold or to go against the grain of his climate, and his work is therefore a response to his "extreme individuation" (171). Here, Becker's work provides a unique and informative form of psychoanalysis that can be applied to writers and literature.

While to a degree, Becker does embrace a clichéd interpretation of the “artist” as a type of aloof recluse, his assertion that creativity is a type of immortality project is appropriate when considering *Leaves of Grass* and *Poet in New York*. Both Whitman and Lorca fit the heroic mold Becker crafts for the “artist”; each carries a burden of having a greater awareness of mortality, of their carnal bodies, of therefore being more emotional, and therefore prone to “extreme individuation” due to a preoccupation with death and anxiety. Each writer sees the current state of the world as a problem where man cannot reconcile the limitless power of the human mind with the realization of the inevitability of bodily death. Furthermore, both texts showcase how Whitman and Lorca attempt to solve the problem of mortality using individualized immortality ideologies: Whitman’s echoes of Emerson’s over-soul and Lorca’s invocation of the duende.

Therefore, in Becker’s parlance, while the two writers share a common concern over the inevitability of death, they each display different types of heroism. In “Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman explains that he will “put in my poems that with you is heroism upon land and sea / And I will report all heroism from an American point of view” (84-85). Whitman’s displayed heroism features a strong voice that attempts to speak for a nation, while Lorca performs heroism in solitary; where Whitman is exclamatory, Lorca is meditative, and where Whitman finds beauty, Lorca finds unfulfilled promise. Both of these heroisms – the over-soul and the duende - are further explained in the next chapter, which examines Whitman and Lorca’s shared need for elegizing themselves prior to their deaths as displays of power over their bodies. In later chapters, the over-soul and duende come to inform specific beliefs shared by Whitman and Lorca: the ramifications of lineage upon the homosexual body and the problem of

inequality between powerful and marginalized races. These themes illustrate how both Whitman and Lorca attempt to deny death in radically different ways, proving that *Poet in New York's* labelling as “Whitman-esque” refers not merely to scope or form, but also to its denials of death.

Chapter 2

Ersatz Elegies: The Over-Soul and Duende Explained as Ideologies of Immortality

According to Becker, the fundamental cause of death anxiety is the inability to reconcile the material body and the immaterial soul. Therefore, the term “death anxiety” can be thought of as an umbrella term, referring not only to one’s impending mortality, but to any bodily function that reveals indicates temporality or carnality. For the purposes of this study, I have limited my analysis of death anxiety in Whitman and Lorca’s poetry to three components of bodily anxiety: anxiety over their own bodies, anxiety over the infertile bodies of homosexuals, and anxiety over the inequality between the bodies of white Americans and the bodies of African Americans. In each of these anxieties, the over-soul and duende manifest as unique panaceas. However, before examining these three types of bodily anxiety, it is important to define both the over-soul and the duende in full to explain the significant influences historical context and geography had upon the formation of these ideologies.

Turning first to Whitman’s over-soul, this belief structure embodies the tenets and philosophies of the New England transcendentalists, writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott. Relying heavily on wide-ranging influences from English romanticism to Eastern religions, this school of thought

subscribes to a unity between man and nature that seems to simultaneously deny and celebrate the self simultaneously. While not a complete definition of the transcendental school of thought, this brief explanation of transcendentalism signifies its functionality within Becker's theories of heroism and immortality ideologies. The transcendentalists believe that since the self is part and parcel with nature, an individual's death is no longer the end; instead, the self continues on through the existence of the world. Thus, the transcendentalists downplay the finality of death by merging the self and nature. Becker invokes Emerson, the accepted father of transcendentalism, early in *The Denial of Death*. Becker writes, "We should feel prepared, as Emerson once put it, to recreate the whole world out of ourselves even if no one else existed" (2). By doing this, Becker aligns his psychoanalytic mythology of death anxiety with the transcendentalist interconnectivity of human nature, drawing a clear parallel between the soul and death. Like Emerson, Becker finds that the world, or at least humanity's appreciation of it, derives from the self. Becker differs from Emerson in that Becker believes this act of creation to be an involuntary act of repression. Emerson's heroic ideal of the self as the source of Nature is idyllic and ideological; it is this concept of the self as "over-soul" that Whitman echoes in his writings. According to Becker, humans are unable to trust themselves, to fully embrace the heroic action, as completely as Emerson and Whitman suggest. Rather, our sense of self is disrupted by the fear of death and an overarching anxiety of our own mortality.

Where Becker sees that humanity subconsciously denies the fact that their solitary lives are insignificant and meager, Emerson's over-soul posits that a person's spirit unifies man and nature. Emerson coins the "over-soul" in an essay published in 1841 that

argues the soul as the source of man's experience: "that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere... within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (237). As opposed to essentialist beliefs in the separate nature of objects, transcendentalism breaks down the barriers between objects, instead positing that there is an interrelation between people, objects, nature and the soul. Emerson also speaks of this interrelation as a kind of unity between Nature and man. "A rule of one art," Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836), "or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of Nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit" (23). This "central Unity" represents a transmogrification of Nature into a function of the soul. In the view of Emerson, the soul expands to encompass Nature, religion and beauty in one aesthetic. Emerson comes to the conclusion that "All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion" (21). Emerson terms this unity the over-soul. In Emerson's view, though human life is meager, humanity only realizes its insignificance due to a belief in a greater force, whether it be God, nature, or any other spiritual belief system.

Furthermore, transcendentalists not only apotheosize the individual as an attempt for immortality, they also attempt to create a legacy through labelling their philosophy as a new and unique worldview. By advocating for unity between Nature and man, transcendentalism also encourages an active engagement with Nature, one that changes with the times, as opposed to a passive holding pattern mentality. Emerson and Whitman alike stressed the importance of remaining current, with a forward-thinking philosophy of

learning, not a retrospective. “The foregoing generations,” Emerson writes, “beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? ... Let us demand our own works and laws and worship” (3).

Transcendentalism is therefore a macrocosm of a person intending to leave behind a legacy after his death; except, in this case, the transcendentalists want to leave behind a unique, new language and philosophy differing from those that came before it.

While the term “over-soul” is literally utilized only by Emerson, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* espouse beliefs about the soul that closely align with Emerson’s.

Whitman writes in a comment to *Leaves of Grass*:

My poems when complete should be a *unity*, in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body, (senses, soul, head, trunk, feet, blood, viscera, man-root, eyes, hair) or that a perfect musical composition is (783).

What I propose is that Whitman’s utilization of Emerson’s over-soul relies upon the utilitarian aspects of Transcendentalism to defend himself from death. If Emerson’s over-soul unites everything into a good, beautiful experience, then nothing is shameful or fearful.

In one of his most famous poems, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman admits to at times struggling with anxiety, depression and negativity, but through the transcendental crossing-over of the over-soul, he quells his fears and transfers his calming “self” to his audience. Through Emerson’s over-soul, Whitman conceives of an interconnected web of experience, in which one man’s fears or depression can be alleviated through the optimism of another. Whitman admits his own struggles with depression and anxiety, describing them as dark patches:

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?
(65-68)

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman rhythmically alternates between exclamatory odes and quieter meditations, and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” functions as a microcosm of the work as a whole. Beginning as a bold apotheosizing of the self, the speaker shifts from one who sees the tides, clouds and all people at all times “face to face” in the first 5 lines to one who seems to collapse under such a heavy poetic burden. Whitman attempts to empathize with an audience that fears death by showing that he too feels doubt about the worth of his poetry and depression about his life. However, by the poem’s end, Whitman has addressed these doubts and found them unjustified: “We fathom you not – We love you – there is perfection in you also” (130). Whitman assuages his fear of failure and of death by the over-soul’s capacity for finding beauty in the dark and the dead. Whitman abandons his mortal body by diffusing his ego into the egos of others.

While Whitman seeks to deny death through the diffusion of the self through the over-soul, Federico Garcia Lorca at times seems to embrace the trappings of death. In many ways, the Spanish poet can be read as anti-transcendentalist. For Lorca, death and life are not unified by the soul and death is not merely another stage of life. Instead, Lorca sees death as the end of life it truly is. Nevertheless, Lorca does find death beautiful through the Spanish aesthetic duende. Christopher Maurer sheds light on the many meanings of the term, particularly ambiguous to Americans and other societies that have based their understandings of art on binary oppositions of good and evil. Maurer recounts:

The notion of duende (from *duen de casa*, “master of the house”) came to [Lorca] from popular Spanish culture, where the duende is a playful hobgoblin, a household spirit fond of ruling things, breaking plates, causing noise and making a general nuisance of himself (ix).

This folkloric definition of duende is often utilized by Lorca when speaking about the duende. Pedro Salinas, a contemporary of Lorca’s, argues that the duende springs from a cultural obsession with death, and that Lorca “finds it in all of his individual personality that has to do with his people, with the inheritance of the past. Lorca was born in a country that for centuries has been living out a kind of special culture that I call the ‘culture of death’” (103-04). In Spanish culture, the duende replaces the muse; dancers and musicians who “have” duende when their performance evokes strong or powerful emotional responses from the audience and themselves. As Maurer explains, the duende is “an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability, on rare occasions to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to them” (ix).

However, when I write about the duende in Lorca’s work, I am using the term in an entirely different manner. I am not referring to the duende as a Spanish folktale, nor as a Spanish equivalent to the muses. I am not referring to the duende as a type of mental phenomenon that can be physically identified, such as *déjà vu* or some such feeling. When I refer to the duende in this study, I am referring to a characteristic of Lorca’s poetry that aligns itself with Whitman’s over-soul as a search for immortality. Lorca’s poetry that exhibits duende derives its beauty from a deep awareness of death. Eric Reinholtz explains that “Lorca sees the duende as a revolutionary force existing in dialectical opposition to the traditional aesthetic responses associated with death and mourning” (138). Instead of responding to death through anger, sadness or frustration,

Lorca challenges death. Where Whitman uses the transcendentalist over-soul to muzzle the fangs of death, Lorca channels the fear of death into the artistic duende; both writers yearn for immortality through their writings in this way. It is the “momentary burst of inspiration” that Lorca utilizes to keep death at bay in his poetry, and it is the similarities between Lorca and Whitman’s denials of death that unites them.

While Lorca can hardly be termed a transcendentalist, one can see similarities between his controlling aesthetic, the Spanish duende, and the over-soul. A primary similarity between Lorca and Whitman is their drawing influence not from the writers of the established tradition before them, but from their current time and surroundings.

Lorca, citing the composer Louis Lucas, writes that about the connection between poetry and music: “It is the first which appears in Nature, through the imitation of birdsong, the cries of animals, and the infinite sounds of matter” (*ISD* 6)³. Like the over-soul, Lorca’s duende seeks to capture the essence of a particular time period and setting through poetry. However, where the over-soul views Nature, man, and poetry as synonymous and unified through man’s soul, the duende emphasizes the failure of poetry to represent these forces accurately. Through the duende, the writer can only imitate birdsong, not recreate it. Furthermore, the sounds of matter are infinite, denoting man’s inability to fully encapsulate the world. Where Whitman argues confidently that all infinities are derived from the self, Lorca writes in awe of the sublime.

Another similarity between the transcendentalist over-soul and the Spanish duende is that they both share Eastern influence. Lorca gave two lectures that are key to understanding the duende. The first, given in 1929, discusses the influence of music on

³ “ISD” refers to *In Search of the Duende*.

poetry, specifically the genres of classical Gypsy⁴ music, flamenco, and *cante jondo*, an Andalusian performance of singing, dance and guitar accompaniment. In the *cante jondo* lecture, Lorca acknowledges an eastern influence on the duende, except where the transcendentalists brought this influence from Eastern religions, Lorca derives the duende from the interaction between gypsy and native Andalusian: “Do not think that the *siguiriya* and its variants are simply songs transported from the Orient to the West. No, according to Falla, it would be truer to say they were grafted upon native stock” (*ISD* 5). Where the transcendentalists appropriated many ideas and beliefs from eastern religion in their philosophy, they ensured that their beliefs were uniquely American, arguing that the unity that they sought between Nature, the soul, and man was informed by American independence and individuality. Similarly, Lorca argues that the Andalusian duende, derived from *cante jondo*, is a paradoxical mixture of the gypsy sense of homelessness and Andalusian character. He summarizes, “it is that the song of Andalusia, though essentially like that of a people geographically remote from us, possesses its own intimate, unmistakable national character” (*ISD* 5). Again, this is a similarity between transcendentalism and the duende that also reveals a profound difference in the unity-centered belief structures of transcendentalism and the passionate sublimity of the duende.

The most pronounced difference between the over-soul and duende, therefore, is the latter’s willingness to confront death as it is, rather than weaken it through transcendental unities. The denial that Lorca undertakes is not one of similarity – that is,

⁴ The Roma. Because of Lorca’s continual reference to the gypsy ballad, ode and dance, I have decided to refer to them as Gypsies.

everything is beautiful, so there is nothing to fear – but one of evasion. In “Play and Theory of the Duende,” a lecture given in 1933 in Buenos Aires, Lorca explains how the duende thrives in the areas of dance, bullfighting and spoken poetry of Spain as a metaphorical struggle between the self and death: “Every man and every artist, whether he is Nietzsche or Cezanne, climbs each step in the tower of his perfection by fighting his duende, not his angel, nor his muse” (ISD 58). Here, Lorca distinguishes himself from poets who ascribe to divine inspiration, whether it be the Miltonic voice of God or the classical Muse invocations. The duende is more mysterious than both of those traditions, more primal and carnal. In terms of Beckerian immortality ideology, Lorca all but confirms that the duende is used as a type of denial of death by comparing it to the bullfight. In the cries of “*Ole!*” the bullfighter, the tango dancer, and the poet dance with death in a “real and poetic evasion of this world,” resulting in momentary triumph.

Out of all the poems in *Poet in New York*, the duende is most clearly seen in “Little Girl Drowned in the Well.” Disturbingly, Lorca depicts a child trapped in an eternal struggle with death. “You’ll always be undying at the end of waves that accept / the combat of roots and anticipated solitude. / ... that never reaches the sea” (16-18). The poem is structured in tercets, with each concluding line repeating the phrase “... that never reaches the sea.” Lorca constructs a dualism between the girl and the well, in which the girl never “returns” to her source, i.e., dies, while the water, here symbolizing death, also fails to return to its source. Townspeople and rescuers rush to save the young girl, but they are continually thwarted by the line “... that never reaches the sea.” The poem ends without a pronouncement on the girl’s state; she is neither alive nor dead, locked in a Keatsian Grecian urn, in the permanent struggle of the poem.

Therefore, for all the similarities between the over-soul and the duende, there are just as many profound differences. Where Whitman's struggles with death anxiety are often salved by the end of the poem, Lorca receives no such treatment. For this reason, *Poet in New York* is on its face an odd cognate to *Leaves of Grass*. Where Whitman attempts to create a poem that perfectly encapsulates America's triumphant transcendentalist unity of self, country, and language, Lorca seems to write a text that glorifies the presence of death and hopelessness. However, by using Becker as a guide, we see that Lorca's duende is in fact a "re-vision" of Whitman's over-soul amidst the differing historical context of late 1920's America. Becker's theories on human nature and a common desire for immortality unite Whitman and Lorca together as artists committed to the denial of death through writing. Lorca's duende reflects a failure of the over-soul to fully transcend the time after Whitman's death to the modernist period. Due to factors ranging from the extravagant materialism that characterized 1920's America through the economic disaster of the Great Depression to the segregation and discrimination of blacks and homosexuals, Lorca cannot embrace the optimistic, unifying spirit of Whitman and in its place adheres to the death-centric duende. For Lorca, death was neither lucky nor beautiful, but a constant reality.

To better understand this concept of the duende as a revision of the over-soul, it is helpful to look at instances of self-elegy in Whitman and Lorca's poetry. While the actual deaths of Whitman and Lorca are well documented, I want to direct attention here not to the historical accounts of their deaths, but their literary foreshadows. Like many writers, both poets spent a large amount of their time writing about their deaths through elegies and eulogies. Diana Fuss explains the need for elegy through three voices: the

dying voice, the receiving voice and the surviving voice. The dying voice refers to the author feeling a need to release their emotional pain and anguish prior to death. The receiving voice is the writer's direct audience, whether that be a god, a lover, a family member or a heroic idol with whom the poet desperately wants to remain with. Finally, the surviving voice is the voice of the reader, who interprets the poet's words and develops a lasting impression of the person through the writing. In the case of Whitman's and Lorca's self-elegies, the dying voice and the receiving voice are one and the same; both refer to the poet themselves. As Becker tells us, the writing process of the artist is a search for immortality that requires a person to deny a fundamental knowledge of death; therefore, the self-elegy provides a means for Whitman and Lorca to use their ideologies of the over-soul and duende to script an idyllic death for themselves.

Indeed, through self-elegy, writers control their life prior to death, their final days, and the lives of those who survive them. Whitman and Lorca express contrasting examples of self-elegy, but strangely, neither of their collections are overtly morbid. Where the former's *Leaves of Grass* bills itself as a profoundly American experience that uplifts the reader through optimistic proclamations of the self, the latter's *Poet in New York* merely purports to be a Spaniard's poetic travelogue. Though the latter is often gruesome and cruel, the darkness in *Poet in New York* grounds itself in an earnest criticism of America and the morals that contribute to its perceived downfall. The author's own fears surrounding death and dying are often shifted onto symbols, such as the young girl drowned in the well mentioned above and the city itself. However, certain poems are exceptions, arguing clearly for their authors' deep concerns about the problem of mortality through anxieties over their bodies.

As early as the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman elegizes himself by establishing a consistent solution to the problem of mortality. Through the subsequent revisions of *Leaves of Grass*, however, Whitman's rhetoric evolves from one of effusive confidence to one that appears more flummoxed and concerned by the temporality of the body. In the first preface (1855), Whitman argues that the great poet is a person who has found in the soul the same strength of the natural world. Inside yourself is a "supremacy," equal to the "power of the sea and the motion of nature":

It is something in the soul which says, Rage on, Whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere, Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, And of all terror and all pain (625).

The early Whitman looks death in the eyes and dares it to blink. To Whitman, ever concerned with softening its blow, death becomes an integral part of life; therefore, part of the human experience is learning to exert control over it. "... if to him is not opened the eternity which gives similitude to all periods and locations and processes and animate and inanimate forms... let him merge in the general run and wait his development..." (633-34). Whitman reiterates his constant control over death in his early poems, those that would become parts of "Starting from Paumanok" and "Song of Myself," in turn both triumphant over death and self-elegiac.

The group of poems that would eventually become "Starting from Paumanok" lay out Whitman's mantra in an incantatory outline of Whitman's hopes for his poetry, nothing short of a complete whitewashing of death's fearfulness. He writes in Section 12:

And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present,
And can be none in the future,

And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may be
Turn'd to beautiful results,
And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than
death (167-69).

The section ends with the statement “I find there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the soul,” illustrating Whitman’s belief in the uniformity of the soul, its ability to transcend bodily constraints through beauty (176). In this passage, Whitman asserts that all troubles or misfortunes that a person goes through in life are indeed, not actually fearful. In fact, the greatest problem that faces mankind, death, is not a tragedy, but beautiful. By utilizing the “soul” as an omnipresent and omnipotent force to unify the good and bad of human experience, Whitman renders the power of death inert.

In Whitman’s mind, therefore, death is no longer something to be feared, but celebrated. To that end, Whitman constructs elegies for himself that exert God-like power over the finality of death. In the sixth section of “Song of Myself,” a simple question from a child on the nature of grass leads to a meditation on the temporality of existence. The conclusion that Whitman reaches is that our loved ones who have died are alive and well:

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at
the end to arrest it,
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and
luckier (125-30).

This passage seems to argue that Whitman proposes a kind of reincarnation takes place after death, in which our lives enter into a naturalist cycle: our bodies become the earth

that nurtures us. The idea of returning after death is also evidenced at the end of “Song of Myself,” as Whitman writes “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from under the grass I love / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (1339-40).

Throughout the many revisions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman further develops his exhibition of death denial through self-elegy by changing his portrayal of death from a temporary stage of life to an enduring one. As Whitman grows older, his notion of death as transference of the physical body to nature shifts to one in which poetic ambition lives on through writing. As he neared death, his characteristic enthusiasm for life and poetry dwindled only slightly, but we do see in the later poems and prefaces a more solemn tone as opposed to the triumphant confidence of the earlier prefaces. The published editions of *Leaves of Grass* in 1888 and 89 conclude with “Good-Bye My Fancy!” and a long prose coda to his work, the essay, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” both of which provide resolution to a poet who continued to write, revise and contemplate the profundity throughout his lengthy lifetime. As a self-elegy, the poem “Good-Bye My Fancy!” begins and ends with Whitman bidding farewell to his “self,” the alter-ego who inspired his poetic genius. He writes, “I’m going away, I know not where / Or to what fortune, or whether I may ever see you again” (3-4), illustrating that Whitman had conscious feelings that his life was nearing its end. Addressed to the self, the poem functions as both a self-elegy and a poem of farewell. Furthermore, in true Whitman fashion, this farewell is also a type of greeting: “Long indeed have we lived; slept, filter’d, become really blended into one / Then if we die we die together, (yes, we’ll remain one)” (12-13). The good-bye becomes a hail, and through the process of self-

elegy, the poet achieves a level of introspective transcendence. Whitman's death is no longer an event of pure despair, but a new stage of his poetic journey.

Continuing this duality of meeting and parting, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" finds the poet surveying his creation and finding it good, mostly.

I look upon 'Leaves of Grass,' now finish'd to the end of its opportunities and powers, as my definitive *carte visite* to the coming generations of the New World, if I may assume to say so. That I have not gain'd the acceptance of my own time, but have fallen back on fond dreams of the future ... (472)

As mentioned above, while contemporary critics of Whitman failed to latch onto his uniquely American, free-verse, grand experiment, Whitman believed his work would live on after his eventual passing, so that one day, in a different age, they will achieve the success he sought for them. To Whitman, literature "does not shine by any luminosity of its own; nor do its poems. They grow of circumstances, and are evolutionary" (475).

Whitman's desire to leave a poetic legacy correlates with a heroic action system in which people crave wealth or fame as cultural signifiers of one's worth, in which people are remembered through inheritance of wealth, names are memorialized on buildings, and parental influences are channeled through their children, bearing their physical characteristics, their name and often their occupations and personality traits. This anxiety over death manifesting itself through child-bearing becomes particularly relevant for Whitman, who never had children of his own and whose complicated sexuality prohibited him from marital relationships.

Like Whitman, who began eulogizing himself in his earliest poems, Lorca wrote of his own death in his earliest poems and plays. However, death seemed to play a much larger role in the young Spaniard's life than Lorca's. Lorca suffered the loss of an infant

sibling, his brother Luis at 22 months, and this loss seemed to affect him profoundly. According to Stainton's biographical account of Lorca's life, the poet was wondering and contemplating his death early in his writing career. In a picture, Lorca is seen reclining with his friends on the ground as if dead. These ritual enactments of his death would inform his writing through the depiction of macabre scenarios: from a girl drowned in a well and to the despairing lives of insects in his first play *The Butterfly's Evil Spell* (Stainton 70).

The two examples above illustrate Lorca's tendency to symbolize the self through different personae or voices. While Whitman largely hides his self-elegiac tendencies beneath a veneer of optimism, Lorca's approach to self-eulogy buries his personality in detailed depictions of New York City, its people and neighborhoods. In *Poet in New York*, Lorca becomes an observer, recounting what he sees as the unfulfilled promise of Whitman's optimistic transcendentalism, and he rarely enters into a confessional mode. An exception arises in the short poem "After a Walk," here quoted in its entirety, which opens *Poet in New York*⁵:

Cut down by the sky.
Between shapes moving toward the serpent
and crystal-craving shapes,
I'll let my hair grow.

With the amputated tree that doesn't sing
and the child with the blank face of an egg.

With the little animals whose skulls are cracked
and the water, dressed in rags, but with dry feet.

⁵ Though I am not fluent in Spanish, careful deliberation took place over which translation of *Poet in New York* to utilize. Eventually, I settled on the version included in Garcia Lorca's *Collected Poems* (2002), by Greg Simon and Steven F. White. Unless otherwise noted, all quoted passages from *Poet in New York* are the results of these translators.

With all the bone-tired, deaf-and-dumb things
and a butterfly drowned in the inkwell.

Bumping into my own face, different each day.
Cut down by the sky! (1-12)

Reading the poem, the influence of Whitman is evident and immediate. Lorca's earlier work could sometimes be seen as derivative of Whitman, such as an extremely early poem beginning with the lines, "In this book I would set down / my entire soul," (qtd. In Stainton 37) but here, Lorca seems to utilize and build on Whitman's influence. One can see how, structurally, Lorca takes Whitman's characteristic enthusiastic anaphora and instills it with pessimism. Instead of repetition of the self, such as Whitman's dolorous "I am" throughout "Song of Myself," Lorca refocuses his poetic gaze from introspection outward "with the" surroundings. The end result is the same. Like Whitman, Lorca transfigures the self from an isolated being to one that becomes one and the same with its surroundings. Whitman becomes the poet of the body and the soul, while Lorca becomes the poet of the Man and animal. It is through this preemptive eulogy, through death, that Lorca is able to cast off the boundaries of the self and become one with the environment. In this way, Lorca embodies the ideals of his heroic action system; even as he seems to understand the desolation of death, he nevertheless weakens its power by distilling the self and lessening its impact. So while Lorca does not romanticize death in the same way as Whitman, he still attempts to understand it.

Elsewhere in *Poet in New York*, a more upfront Lorca does refer to himself directly through self-eulogy, but again, he tempers his death by correlating it with his defeated expectations for America. In "Living Sky," the anxiety that Lorca feels over death and failure is comforted by the natural environment. Lorca proclaims that he

“won’t be able to complain / though I never found what I was looking for” (1-2). Lorca diagnoses his disappointment with America as one of unrealistic expectations. He enters into a dialogue with the reader, connecting to them through a shared experience of what humanity fails to accomplish. The transcendentalist America of Whitman’s poetry, where the body, soul and nature are one, is gone, or never existed. “You can’t pass through the swarming corollas / the air dissolves your teeth of sugar” he writes, “And you can’t caress the elusive fern / without feeling the utter astonishment of ivory” (15-18). Similar to Whitman, there is a sense that one thing can transform into another, but to Lorca this cannot be accomplished without undergoing a great deal of pain.

However, this failure of America to live up to expectations is mitigated by a kind of death where he is able to return to the joyful surroundings of his homeland:

I won’t be able to complain
though I never found what I was looking for;
but I’ll go to the first fluid landscape of heartbeats
so I’ll know that my search has a joyful target
when I’m flying, jumbled with love and sandstorms (23-27).

By returning to nature, by continuing his search somewhere else, Lorca downplays his complaints, and ends the poem nearing his goal of “Love. Visible Love!” (31). Like “Girl Drowned in a Well,” this poem invokes the duende through a kind of stasis. Here, instead of water never being able to return to the sea, the speaker is never able to reach his unknown goal. These patterns, where Whitman renders death inert and Lorca perpetually delays its arrival, will recur as their poems shift from anxieties over their own bodies, to the bodies of the homosexual and the African American.

Chapter 3

The Body Beautiful: Death Anxiety and Homosexuality in “Calamus” and “Ode to Walt Whitman”

While the connection between death anxiety and homosexuality is not explicit, Becker does argue that sexual feelings between two men represent a type of lineage. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker explains the “problem” of homosexuality lies in “the truly gifted and free spirit attempt to bypass the family as the instrument of distinctive procreation” (118). Becker believes that certain individuals react against the notion that humans are mere fornicating animal passing down genes by knowingly behaving in ways that subvert the traditional belief systems of a culture. An individual such as this may bypass the woman and “try to procreate himself spiritually through a linkage with gifted young men, to create them in his own image” (118). I agree with Becker that homosexuality can be thought of as a type of immortality project, but Becker’s explanation is unsuitably predatory and vaguely pedophilic. To Becker, homosexuality is an action, but as Whitman and Lorca illustrate through their poetry, their sexuality was a facet of their identity that caused them anxiety over the limitations of their bodies, which in turn caused them to fear their mortality and lack of legacy.

Due largely to Whitman's homosexual images and themes, certain critics found *Leaves of Grass* crude and ostentatious at the time of its publication. This critical reception to the work was due largely in part to a puritanical society that favored chastity and metaphorical symbolism as opposed to overt depictions of lust and sexuality. However, his supporters praised Whitman's poetry for its willingness to subvert established paradigms. William Dean Howells remarked that "Whitman was not the first to observe that we are all naked under our clothes, but he was one of the greatest, if not the first, to preach a gospel of nudity" (488). Similarly, Emerson wrote a praising note to Whitman in 1855, saying that he was happy to read poems different from "what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament" (Whitman 637). In response to Emerson, Whitman constructed the preface to the 1856 version of *Leaves of Grass*, thanking Emerson for his endorsement. In the letter, Whitman denounces those who label his poetry as vulgar and rebukes calls for the text's censorship on the grounds that in discussing openly matters of sexuality, he is capturing the essence of America. He documents how artists and writers have long been enslaved to a "filthy law," one that "makes the manhood of a man, that sex, womanhood, maternity, desires, lusty animations, organs, acts, [...] unmentionable and to be ashamed of" (644-45). Whitman found this critical climate stifling and argued for the importance of admiring the body and sex. "This filthy law," he writes, "has to be repealed – it stands in the way of great reforms ... I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is" (645). While Whitman includes both sexes in advocating for direct and honest portrayals of the

body, his admiration of the male form remains controversial to this day, creating a debate over the nature of the poet's sexuality.

As Michael Lynch explains, the difficulty of ascertaining Whitman's sexual orientation is partly due to ambiguous comments by the author and the era's yet-to-be delineated difference between heterosexual men who "adhered" to each other and homosexuals, men who felt sexual attraction to other men. An encounter between Whitman and one of his critics illustrates how homosexuality in Whitman's America was not subject to the same social stereotypes as today. Male-male sexual love was relegated to the realm of criminality, whereas strong male friendship was discussed in terms of "adhesiveness" (Lynch 89). Lynch recounts how, in response to a question on his sexuality, Whitman once claimed that he had fathered six illegitimate children. To Lynch, this response is neither an assertion of his heterosexuality nor a purely sarcastic jab at the question, but an argument for committed same-sex comradeship to replace adulterous heterosexual coupling as the foundation of the country's morals. Lynch's argument paints Whitman as a man who was dismissive of the label "homosexual," but who wanted to create a new language that emphasized same-sex comradeship and de-villainized the sexual acts. Lynch writes that Whitman "was actively seeking a mode of expression – both to represent male-male sexual activity and to encourage its potential – that was legally and socially prudent" (89). Here, Whitman is upfront about advocating for male camaraderie, but more coy about the sexual acts themselves.

Lynch's interpretation of Whitman's sexual identity as a homosexual who is open about the value of camaraderie but hesitant to embrace the body helps readers to understand Whitman's tenuous relationship with the male body in his poetry. Whitman's

depiction of the body in his poetry is another means by which the writer uses the over-soul as equalizer. Just as Whitman imagines that the over-soul makes death as beautiful as life, he argues that the body is as beautiful as the soul. Whitman writes in the face of censors who found overt depictions of the body and sexuality vulgar. To Whitman, binary oppositions of the body as sin and the soul as Godly are fallacious. When Whitman proclaims to be the poet of the body and the soul, he reshapes the dialectic into the inclusive over-soul. The oppositional forces of male and female love are also equated, thereby providing some explanation to the question of physical attraction and sexuality. By debunking the binary oppositions that inform American values, he justifies homosexual attraction and calms his anxieties surrounding his sexuality and his own mortality.

Whitman's reliance on the over-soul to erase the divide between male and female indicates a profound fear of death intimately tied with his sexuality. The beautiful, yet forbidden, homosexual themes that populate *Leaves of Grass* indicate Whitman's repression of his fears. His desperate wish to cleanse the male form through the over-soul belies the fact that homosexual practices figuratively embody mortality through an inability to procreate, to leave behind descendants to continue his poetic legacy after his death. Through an analysis of Whitman's rhetorical strategies, John Vincent establishes a similar link between the poet's sexuality and death anxiety. Vincent distinguishes between sexual endeavors that Whitman chooses to reveal and those he keeps secret, arguing that this reluctance to divulge everything about the body indicates a reluctance to accept the brevity of life. Vincent writes that death "stands for permanence which has a lesson to teach about steadfastness, the shortness of time, the mobility and mutability of

forms of life, the exhilaration of extremity, and the temporal shiftiness of written texts” (33). To Vincent, death is both an escape from a society that oppresses same-sex love as well as an opportunity to enter into a state freed from that restriction. By projecting himself into an after-life, Whitman “affords him intimacies more piquant and less vexed than those available without the foreground of utter loss” (34). While I agree with Vincent’s assertion that Whitman finds death to be a viable alternative to life, I argue that Whitman views death not as an escape from society, but as a new avenue to continue to influence and love the world through metaphorical lineages.

To accomplish this paradoxical goal of living through death, Whitman must first unify the schism between the body and soul through his ideology of the over-soul. In the scenario that Becker puts forth, humanity favors the body over the soul, despite the soul often being seen as godly. Cultural heroic action systems often portray humanity as initially god-like beings striving for the heavens, for the sublime, but consistently saddled by the sinfulness of their own bodies. This dialectical opposition of unclean body and godly soul is reiterated in numerous religions and literatures in Western civilization, and it is this binary argument which Whitman rebels against in *Leaves of Grass*. Through the over-soul, Whitman argues that both body and soul are beautiful, since they are both part of a singular entity. “Song of Myself” argues this early in its unfolding: “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (57-58).

Whitman’s conception of the body as a beautiful shadow of the soul provides a philosophical foundation for his defense against his anxiety of mortality by praising the

bodies of social outsiders: specifically, the inferior bodies of infertile homosexuals and the culturally demeaned bodies of the enslaved African.

Focusing first on Whitman's defense of the homosexual body, the influence of Emerson provides tacit evidence of the poet's anxiety. Like the term "over-soul" itself, Whitman's overflowing love for the body had been argued for before in the words of Emerson. In *Nature*, Emerson evokes an imagery of androgyny to illustrate the interconnectivity of Nature, Man and the Soul. He writes, "All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history and it is full of life" (15). In this passage, Emerson employs imagery of fertility and marriage to christen beauty as the progeny of man and nature. The fact that he describes a world comprised of a single sex as "barren" is both logical and instructive in our readings of Whitman's homosexual themes. Despite Whitman's declarations of the beauty of masculine love, the logical fact remains that the union between two males does not have the possibility of childbirth and is therefore deficient in comparison with male – female sexual congress.

Whitman attempts to justify the viability of male-male relations through the over-soul's equalizing philosophy; from changing his sex from male to female to advocating for the beauty of the male form, Whitman argues for the equality of heterosexual and homosexual relationships. In multiple poems, Whitman either writes from a first-person or close third-person female point of view in order to transmit his homosexual attractions through a heterosexual medium. Because of his belief in an interconnected over-soul between humanity, Whitman is able to become the poet of the man, as well as the woman. This amount of narrative freedom hides Whitman's homosexuality to a small

degree, though I do not believe this is his intention. By adopting the persona of a woman, Whitman interjects himself into maternity; in these poems, Whitman comes close to achieving a type of motherhood. In Section 11 of “Song of Myself,” Whitman infamously spies on a woman, herself spying on twenty-eight young men. This woman is herself a symbol of wasted fertility, having “Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome” (3). Wrestling with her sexual desire, the woman imagines herself bathing with the men from within the safety of her room. Howlingly sexual, her phantom bathing experience ends with imagery of male pregnancy:

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge
To the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and
Bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray (214-16).

Repeated throughout these lines is the notion that these men do not know whom it is that has bathed amongst them, caused their bellies to bulge, and received their sprayings. They do not know, for example, whether or not this spirit is male or female. The readers also are not sure, since this fantasy is a projection of Whitman’s. While it is possible that the poem is meant to strictly document the perceived sexual yearning of a woman in her most fertile years, the poem also communicates well the homosexual desires of Whitman by proxy.

Later in “Song of Myself,” Whitman would again reference sexuality through the voices of others. He writes, “Through me forbidden voices / Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil, Voices indecent by me clarified and transigur’d” (516-18). Because of the communicative properties of the over-soul, Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is not so much about “himself” as it is about his ability to channel others.

Multiple selves become one self, and in this way, Whitman aims to express the sexual thoughts and feelings of others, those have been kept secret due to a puritanical society that has demonized the body and sexuality. Whitman remarks, “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is” (521) as a means of defending not only his homosexual attachments to the body, but heterosexuality as well. Through the over-soul, the body spreads outside of the self and becomes a part of nature: “If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it” (526). Whitman imbues the following catalogue of natural sights with homosexual imagery as yet another means of filtering his homosexuality. Instead of writing from the perspective of a woman, he transfigures the male form into nature, worshipping “You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you! / Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you! / Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving longer in my winding paths, it shall be you!” (540-42). By transforming the male form into natural landscape, Whitman makes it fertile.

In the “Calamus” poems, Whitman continues to advocate for the fertility of male-male relationships through the veil of natural images. In “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” the poet constructs an ode to the grass that sprouts from his grave, indicating once again his desire to leave behind a lasting legacy after his death. Whitman writes, “Yet you are beautiful to me you faint tinged roots, you make me think of death / Death is beautiful from you (what indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?)” (10-11). Through the grass, the symbolic presence of Whitman after his passing, Whitman associatively leaps from the beauty of the natural world, to the beauty of death and love, which to him are intrinsically linked. Whitman continues, “O, I think it is not for life I am

chanting here my chant of lovers, I think it must be for death / For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere of lovers” (12-13). In life, Whitman is barren; his true identity has been repressed. However, through death, the poet becomes fertile, “unbares this broad breast of mine [...] long stifled and choked” (20) and leaves behind a part of himself that can achieve love, leaving an “example to lovers to take permanent shape and will through the States” (26).

Like Whitman, Lorca’s homosexuality is made apparent through his poetry. However, where Whitman masks masculine attraction in his poetry through feminine voice or transcendentalist dilution, Lorca depicts homosexuality as forbidden passions made carnal through the duende. While Lorca stops short of blatantly outing himself, the poems in *Poet in New York* attest to illicit encounters in Harlem, a defined and unified homosexual community, and the bodily act of male-male fornication. This shift in treatment of homosexuality, from Whitman’s conflicted battle between adhesiveness and love to Lorca’s direct and explicit depictions, mirrors a pronounced cultural shift from the era of Reconstruction to the Roaring Twenties. While “homosexuality” was not a defined identity in Whitman’s lifetime, by the time of Lorca’s visitation to New York in 1929, there were pronounced homosexual subcultures and icons. Indeed, when Lorca arrived in New York, he enjoyed his visitations to Harlem – the scene of a burgeoning homosexual subculture – the most (Stainton 221). Throughout his life, Lorca associated himself with homosexual icons, from the Surrealist painter Salvador Dali to the American modernist poet Hart Crane. These differences in lifestyles mirror the differences in each writer’s anxieties over homosexuality. Where Whitman quells his anxiety over the sterility and insignificance of his body by imagining the over-soul as a means of transforming the

body into an eternal soul, Lorca offers no such transformation of body into soul or vice versa. Instead, Lorca's anxieties over homosexuality are tamed by the duende, which Lorca invokes to attack America's failure to achieve Whitman's heroic unity of male and female. Where Whitman is able to return as a woman or as nature, Lorca is unable to make this transition. Like the girl in the well who is trapped between life and death, Lorca's homosexual anxiety is unable to play out, and therefore Lorca accepts this ineffectual stasis as beautiful.

Lorca's introduction to Whitman and the homosexual subculture of Harlem were instrumental in crafting Lorca's own poetics of homosexuality. According to Leslie Stainton, Lorca's meetings with Felipe to discuss and read Walt Whitman were instrumental in the poet's burgeoning homosexuality. Stainton explains how Felipe instructed Lorca of Whitman's same sex love poems to "comrades," and that to Lorca, "the American succeeded in forging a poetic language through which to convey the beauty of love between men" (239). Lorca interpreted Whitman's language of "adhesiveness" as a sensual argument for male-male attraction. The dual influences of Harlem and Whitman prompted drastic changes in the quantity and intensity of homosexual imagery in *Poet in New York*, indicating that not only did Lorca adopt Whitmanesque line lengths and rhythms, but also his bent toward natural imagery, his deep tie to his homeland, and his sexuality. *Poet in New York*, according to Candelas Newton, "addresses what is not apparent because it is repressed or silenced by the order of reality" and supposes that Whitman's influence encourages expression of Lorca's homosexuality (49).

While critics like Newton and Ruth Tobias assert the importance of Lorca's sexuality in his writing, other critics have downplayed its influence since, like Whitman, Lorca never outwardly professed his homosexuality. For example, early Spanish critics made no reference to the poet's sexuality whatsoever. However, Alberto Mira notes that this neglect is due most likely to widespread homophobia within Spanish culture. Mira describes how Lorca grew up in an environment that was likely even more stringent against homosexuality than Whitman's. Spain's unwillingness to accept or address homosexuality throughout the early 20th century sprang from the country's deeply religious background and extended from daily life into the fields of literary criticism. He asserts that before 1991, "no significant work had focused on how homosexuality could affect the works of canonical writers, or indeed on personalities of Spanish culture and their position towards homosexuality" (Mira 3). Once Spain finally began to address homosexuality, it was still faced with a fundamental problem of perspective. Mira explains the problem lies in the fact that Spanish critics "always see homosexuality as a category of otherness, not a category of 'experience'" (Mira 6). Therefore, for a large part of the twentieth century, Lorca's sexuality was not a subject of criticism in his native country.

The silence surrounding Lorca's sexuality made the release of Angel Sahuquillo's *Federico Garcia Lorca and the Culture of Male Homosexuality* all the more important. Sahuquillo's book references Lorca's poetry and plays to explore the means in which Lorca adopts a persona of a silenced homosexual in order to "go beyond the personal. [Lorca's homosexual symbols] can be found within what we will call a *culture of homosexuality or homosexual culture*" (25, Sahuquillo's emphasis). In placing Lorca's

work within a larger literary and social subculture, Sahuquillo is able to explore how Lorca's poetry struggles against the repression of homosexual anxiety. Tracing Lorca's development as a writer, Sahuquillo remarks that *Poet in New York* marks a stylistic divergence from the rest of his work because "Only in 'Ode to Walt Whitman'... will the theme of silenced homosexuality clearly appear" (24-25). Indeed, Sahuquillo is correct in asserting that "Ode to Walt Whitman" is the only poem from the collection that clearly focuses on the silenced homosexual; however, Sahuquillo overlooks numerous other poems from the work where Lorca exhibits anxiety over male-male attraction and, through the duende, displaces his anxiety through perpetually delaying death. Through this delaying, the duende reveals itself as a revision of the over-soul: a revision that fails to transcend homosexual anxiety over mortality into a posthumous image.

While Sahuquillo does overlook several poems from *Poet in New York* that speak on homosexuality, it is important to begin our analysis with the one he remembered: "Ode to Walt Whitman." The poem's most defining characteristic is Lorca's inflammatory criticisms of flamboyant homosexuality, wherein Lorca seems to embrace slanderous and offensive terminology. Sahuquillo says that Whitman represents an alternative to "impure" homosexuality, that Lorca's ode is meant to honor Whitman's "division between body and soul, between homosexual practice and spiritual love" (73). Meanwhile, John K. Walsh, who asserts that the poem is "perhaps the most significant – certainly the most complete – modern poem about homosexualities" (257) argues that the poem is Lorca's effort to "tolerate his own homosexuality by [disconnecting] it from the grotesquerie of visible categories" (271). It is not this study's aim to focus on the gradations of homosexual subculture, but to work toward a reasoning behind Lorca's

anxiety in the first place. Like Whitman, I believe the source of Lorca's anxiety to be procreatic, a frustration at his inability to transcend mortality. However, Lorca's disappointment at America's inability to realize Whitman's unified version of sexuality results in Lorca calming his anxiety not through a transcendent continuation of life, but through a constant staving off of death through the duende.

Like Whitman's Section 11 of "Song of Myself," "Ode to Walt Whitman" begins with a description of boys in various states of undress; however, instead of a leisurely bath, these boys are working:

Ninety thousand miners taking silver from the rocks
and children drawing stairs and perspectives.

But none of them could sleep,
none of them wanted to be the river,
none of them loved the huge leaves
or the shoreline's blue tongue (4-9).

Already, we see how what Lorca sees in New York in 1920 contradicts what Whitman advocated for. These boys are mechanistic and urban, "battling with industry," (11) profoundly separated from nature and each other. Lorca's displeasure with New York, a mire of wires and death, manifests in the hearses that "bear away those who don't work" (24). The landscape is barren, the images unnatural. To counter this dreariness, Lorca invokes the spirit of Walt Whitman, bringing about a complete tonal and imagistic shift from despair to hope.

Lorca describes homosexual attraction to Whitman through enduring, natural and mythological imagery:

Not for a moment, Walt Whitman, lovely old man,
have I failed to see your beard full of butterflies,
nor your corduroy shoulders frayed by the moon,

nor your thighs as pure as Apollo's
nor your voice like a column of ash (29-33).

In Lorca's view, Whitman becomes God-like, compared to the poetic god Apollo; Lorca also retains Whitman's transcendental mergings with nature. By placing butterflies in Walt Whitman's beard and placing his shoulders amongst the moonlight, Lorca literally suggests Whitman is a force of nature. It is to this ideal that Lorca compares the "urban faggots" of New York. Lorca's displeasure, some might say hatred, of the homosexuals described in this poem stems from perceived cowardice or lack of control. "Trembling between the legs of chauffeurs," (50) the people Lorca describes are those who evoke Whitman without understanding his ideals, who skulk in the night "while the moon lashes them on the street corners of terror" (72). Lorca disagrees with the concealed and violent performances of homosexuality by so-called "faggots" and views it antithetical to Whitman's noble precedent.

However, Lorca himself does not quell his anxieties over death and sexuality in the same way as Whitman. Instead, Lorca argues that man must find some way to delay death, rather than return from it. Later in "Ode to Walt Whitman," Lorca argues:

Man is able, if he wishes, to guide his desire
Through a vein of coral or a nude as blue as the sky:
Tomorrow, loves will become stones, and Time
A breeze that drowns in the branches (88-91).

Like Whitman, through natural imagery Lorca argues against the sterility of homosexual relations. However, instead of advocating for a posthumous reincarnation to contribute to a lasting legacy, Lorca argues for a perpetual slowing of time. In this way, death never comes, and so homosexual attraction between two males is justified.

Other than “Ode to Walt Whitman,” *Poet in New York* includes two other poems which feature Lorca imagining through the duende a delay of death. In “Your Childhood in Menton,” Lorca exhibits anxiety over attraction to an unnamed male figure. The poem opens in reality, as Lorca recounts a homosexual encounter from the person’s “shy loneliness in hotels” before moving to an abstract symbol of repression, the person’s “pure mask of another sign” (3-4). It is this repression of the homosexual that Lorca blames for the failure of the relationship:

What I gave you, Apollonian man, was the standard of love,
fits of tears with an estranged nightingale .
But ruin fed upon you, you whittled yourself to nothing
for the sake of fleeting, aimless dreams (9-12)

Throughout the poem, Lorca mythologizes the male anatomy, from his invocation of the god of poetry here to later in the poem, when his imagery turns destructive and barren: his own “torso circumscribed by fire” and the other person’s “waist of restless sand.” (8, 15). By depicting the body using violent natural imagery, Lorca provides an incendiary alternative to Whitman’s peaceful reincarnations. Like Whitman, Lorca also represents his homosexual anxiety through images of infertility, but unlike Whitman, Lorca has no transcendental over-soul to allow for a posthumous lineage. The homosexual attraction in Lorca is destructive, chaotic and indicative of a fundamental split between the body and soul. Lorca writes “But in every corner I must look for your warm soul / that is without you and doesn’t understand you” (17-18). So instead of using death as an “escape plan” for his anxiety, Lorca invokes the duende to place his anxiety into a type of arrested development, where the end is always looming but never comes, and love is the “flight of

the doe / through the endless breast of whiteness” (41-42). The poem ends where it begins, indicating the stasis of Lorca’s duende.

In “Little Viennese Waltz,” Lorca depicts a male object of affection as a surreal, frightening embodiment of death:

In Vienna there are four mirrors
in which your mouth and the echoes play.
There is a death for piano
that paints the little boys blue (20-24).⁶

Like in “Your Childhood in Menton,” the object of Lorca’s affection is described using imagery that evokes death, fear, and memory. It is through remembrance that Lorca confesses, “Because I love you, I love you, my love / in the attic where the children play” (28-29). The poem progresses as Lorca turns this remembrance into thoughts for the future. However, as Lorca turns to the future he sees only the past, wants only to return to where he was before:

I will leave my mouth between your legs
my soul in photographs and lilies
and in the dark wake of your footsteps,
my love, my love, I want to leave
violin and grave, the ribbons of the waltz (40-45)

The poem ends with a passage, charged with homoeroticism, in which Lorca transforms his anxieties into photographs and memories. His body becomes one with his lover’s, and his soul remains in stasis through unchangeable images and thoughts. In this way, Lorca is able to leave behind the grave by remaining in the past.

From these poems, we uncover another common thread between Whitman and Lorca’s dual ideologies of the over-soul and duende. Along with their capacity for self

⁶ The translation here loses the rhyme, which might explain the surrealism.

elegy, both the over-soul and duende allow their respective poets leeway in metaphorically overcoming the physical constraints of the body. Through the over-soul, Whitman imagines a way to alleviate the anxiety over his inability to bear children and leave a legacy due to his homosexuality. Meanwhile, through the duende, Lorca creates a form of arrested development in his poetry, where death is postponed and the body exists in stasis. By downplaying the physicality and mortality of the body, both poets in turn are able to embrace their homosexuality while introducing logic that quells the social and cultural anxieties placed upon homosexuals. In the following chapter, we shall see how Whitman and Lorca use their immortality ideologies in a similar way to alleviate anxieties related not only to their bodies, but to the bodies of the marginalized peoples of lower social classes and minority races.

Chapter 4:

“The Blood that Searches a Thousand Roads for Deaths”: The Body’s Role in Bridging the Divide Between White and Black in Whitman and Lorca

Whitman and Lorca were constantly reminded of their own mortality through anxiety over their own, mortal, bodies and their specific worries over their inability to procreate through homosexual relationships. Not only were their own bodies reminders of mortality, but the bodies of marginalized African-American societies also caused Whitman and Lorca great anxiety over cultural inequality between races. Whitman and Lorca share a paradoxical desire to portray the African American as both equal and other. Despite their subordinate station in America, Whitman and Lorca attempt to raise them to an equal position in their poetry as means to calm their own anxiety over their bodies. Though they share the mortality of white Americans, both Whitman and Lorca idealize the African body through perfect physical conditions and romanticized affinities for music and dance.

Whitman and Lorca both deplored racism and considered it a major flaw in both of their nations. Both poets share a love for homeland in their poetry: Whitman for the great American experiment and Lorca for the pastoral region of Spain, Andalusia. At the heart of many of their poems is a desire to express the intangible beauties of the land, its

people, and the spiritual connection between the two. Passages from *Leaves of Grass* have often been utilized out-of-context by politicians, advertisers, and corporations to embody a sense of youth, patriotism, and a kind of rebellious spirit emblematic of American ideals. Similarly, following Lorca's death, many artists turned to the poet as an anti-war icon. In this way, both poets are mistakenly labeled as "patriotic" in a way that fails to adequately explain each poet's relationship with his home country. While Whitman does patriotically declare that "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), to consider his patriotism as a blind praise of the country and its politics is mistaken. Whitman's goal is not to haphazardly proclaim America's superiority over other nations, but to recognize the potential of the country to eradicate prejudicial barriers between people. Similarly, Lorca does not argue for the perfection of his homeland, but uses pastoral imagery of Andalusia metaphorically to suggest calm as opposed to a hectic, urbanized New York. In fact, large portions of *Leaves of Grass* are critical of the United States and its people for their racist treatment of enslaved Africans, while *Poet in New York* seeks to uplift African-American communities by comparing their experience with Gypsies, an ostracized group of people Lorca was deeply familiar with. In these passages, Whitman and Lorca attempt to quell anxieties of inequality through ideologies that romanticize the marginalized body.

In Whitman's first preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he qualifies his praise of America with an explanation as to why it deserves such acclaim:

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies ... but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its

ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people (617).⁷

The poet's role, according to Whitman, is to translate the beauty of the common people into words, a task that he feels has not been accomplished in poetry to date. *Leaves of Grass* represents "the gigantic and generous treatment" of the greatness of the common people (617). Whitman's effusive praise of America should not be taken as patriotism, but as a plea for beauty among the common. The medium he chooses—unrhymed kinetic poetry—reflects the utilitarian nature of his message extolling the common people. Later in the preface, Whitman concludes that the poet must make the beauty of the everyday clear, because "folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects ... they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls" (621). Whitman's manifesto, by way of preface, aligns with his transcendentalist goals of uniting the binary oppositions of self—nature, body—soul, and male—female while arguing that America, with its democratic ideals and relatively brief history, is the perfect nation to accomplish this unity.

Whitman's preface also documents the major obstacle in the path of America's transcendent future: the inequality between one man and another due to slavery. When discussing liberty, Whitman believes that slaves are to be admired:

When I and you walk abroad upon the earth stung with compassion of the sight of numberless brothers answering our equal friendship and calling no man master— and when we are elated with noble joy at the sight of slaves... when the soul retires in the cool communion of the night and surveys its experience and has much extasy over the word and deed that put back a helpless innocent person into the gripe of all the gripers or into any cruel inferiority (628).

⁷ Ellipses are the author's.

Stopping short of pleading for the freedom of slaves, Whitman instead advocates for empathetic equality. Like Whitman's conception of his sexuality, his position on slavery is hard to classify. According to biographer Jerome Loving, Whitman was not so much an abolitionist as he was pro-Union, a "free-soil" proponent of the anti-slavery movement. Along with President Lincoln, Whitman favored re-colonization. The passage above indicates as much; even if Whitman did advocate for the freedom of slaves, he still saw them as "other."

The position of the African slave as subservient was problematic to Whitman, because, Whitman imagines the body unified with spirituality through the over-soul. However, because Whitman viewed slaves as an "other," he felt a notable anxiety over their seeming inequality. The conflict between the marginalization of reality and the equality of idealism provides the basis for Whitman's adopting the voice of the African in many of his poems, since he believed that the over-soul could unify the African slave and his surroundings. For example, in "Song of Myself," Whitman describes America through numerous catalogues of people, occupations, and places, including the role of the slave. In this way, the slave becomes another voice for Whitman to adopt, the same way he writes from the perspective of a woman or a blade of grass atop his grave. Through the over-soul, Whitman attempts to erase the differences in the white and black body. By reinforcing the strength of the over-soul, Whitman alleviates his own fears over death and his homosexuality.

When Whitman describes slaves in "Song of Myself," as literal embodiments, that is, as perfect examples of the beauty of the bodily form. In Section 13, the negro, a "picturesque giant" exemplifies the strength and stature of a man perfectly in control of

his bodily form. “The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain / The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard, steady and tall he stands pois’d on one leg on the string-piece” (225-26). The passage depicts the irony of a person totally in control of his being despite his lack of freedom. In addition, this passage indicates both Whitman’s sexual attraction to the male form and his admiration of slaves:

His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens
Over his hip-band,
His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of
Of his hat away from his forehead,
The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the
Black of his polish’d and perfect limbs (227-29).

Whitman chooses to focus on the negro’s body, rather than breach into his thoughts. This evocative lengthy description, over six lines in all, shows the importance of the body to Whitman as an equalizing measure between white American and African slave. The purpose of Whitman’s obsession with the African body is not to further stereotypes about the race’s anatomical superiority, but to combat prejudicial beliefs of black animality.

Here, Whitman merely observes the body of a slave but as “Song of Myself” continues, Whitman begins to incorporate the slave body into his own. In Section 33, Whitman purports to absorb the pain of a runaway slave, to feel “The twingers that sting like needles in his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and the bullets” (836). It is through shared suffering and pain that Whitman imagines the over-soul transforming his body into the slave’s. From feeling the pain of a slave, Whitman asserts that he is a slave: “Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen, I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn’d with the ooze of my skin” (839-40). In these

lines, Whitman transitions from viscerally describing the body - a literal spillage of flesh and blood - to metaphorically absolving it of pain. "Agonies are one of my changes of garments," Whitman argues. Again, we see Whitman taking a lax stance against slavery that in contemporary arguments would be problematic; however, in Whitman's diminution of the evils and horrors of slavery, his desire to wipe the pain away with a change of clothes, Whitman reveals the extent of his belief in the over-soul. Through the over-soul, Whitman transforms his body from one race to another, underscoring his desires for equality between bodies and immortality through legacies.

Therefore, Whitman's belief in the perfection of the body is challenged not only by his body's inability to procreate through homosexual relationships, but through the culturally constructed divide between white man and African slave. His belief in the body as an equal partner to the soul not only allows him to establish a metaphorical lineage despite his homosexuality, but to eliminate the racial divide through a merging of the body with the political. Karen Sanchez-Eppler reiterates this point, asserting:

His celebration of the body not only reinterprets the body but also uses that reinterpretation to redefine the political. Even Whitman's effacement of the political origins of his poetics, as in his deletion of master and slave from [Section 21 of "Song of Myself"], ultimately serves not to dismiss the political in favor of the personal and bodily, but rather to absorb each into the other, to demonstrate that the same issues that inform political practice also designate individual identity (850).

What Sanchez-Eppler's passage alludes to is an early notebook jotting made by Whitman prior to 1855, in which Whitman claimed to be both slave and master, identifying with both walks of life and the struggles of each. I quote Sanchez-Eppler at length because her assertion that Whitman utilizes a poetics of merger, in which the poet uses one thematic area (the personal, in this case) to embody the issues of another (the political) is

tangential to my argument on the over-soul's transformations of the body to satiate separate anxieties. Sanchez-Eppler discusses how Whitman utilizes the imagery of blood in "I Sing the Body Electric" to "merge" the slave into mainstream society, and rightfully states that the violence of this merging is problematic.

"I Sing the Body Electric," which became "Poem of the Body" in the 1856 edition, does at first glance seem to glorify the slave handler and demean the slave. He confesses that prior to the war, he would "often go to the slave-mart and watch the sale" (96). This line seems to confess, all too easily, that Whitman allowed for and even to some degree, took enjoyment in the practice of human trafficking. This type of reading is too presentist to be entirely accurate. Since slavery culture had been so thoroughly entrenched in the American experience of 1855 (and even in 1881, many years post Civil War) this admission should be taken not as an exoneration of slave auctioning, but as a contextual construction. To Whitman, there is no better image debunking the inequality of man than the false juxtaposition of auctioneer and slave. The purpose of the poem is not, as Sanchez-Eppler argues, to strip away the body until all that remains is the common blood between auctioneer and slave, but to glorify the body by forecasting the reversal of fortunes between the slave seller and the slave. Through the over-soul, Whitman makes the mortal body immortal. Whitman foresees a future where the divide experienced by the African slave is rendered moot by equalizing the roles of the white and black body.

Whitman makes clear throughout the poem that this auctioneer has mis-valued and mis-understood the body itself. At the beginning of "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman debunks the notion that the soul is part of the mind or heart, and makes clear

that the entire body is demonstrative of emotion. “The expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face / It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists / It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck” (12-14). The body is not simply a pound of flesh, but an intrinsic part of the soul itself and perfect in every way. Therefore, when Whitman later takes the role of slave seller, he is doing so not to indicate difference or inferiority, but to showcase equality based on the similar properties of the slave body. The auctioneer’s job, after all, was to advertise the strength of the slave through his or her bodily appearance. Whitman catalogues the slave’s body with much aplomb, moving inwardly from the head, to the limbs, to the muscle, to the blood.

However, as the seller, Whitman chooses not to merely focus on the physical body, but to hypothesize on the future this body might have:

This is not only one man, this is the father of those who shall be
Fathers in their turns,
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments
and enjoyments (113-115).

Of note here is the fact that Whitman makes these predictions based upon the body. Through the heart, man derives his “passions, desires, reachings, aspirations” (111), not through race or family. It is the body that achieves immortality through the slave’s children, those who will continue to father other sons, who in turn will assume the role of their current oppressors through the achievement of leadership roles. In this way, the slave is in a position very similar to the free white man, who Whitman addresses, saying “Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you could trace back through the centuries” (117). Whitman later says of a female slave “She too is not only herself, she is the teeming mother of mothers / she is the bearer of them that shall grow and be mates

to the mothers” (119-120). Whitman’s anxiety over the inequality of the slave is alleviated because he simultaneously recognizes that mankind universally stems from perfect bodies and foresees a time in the future when the inequality between slave and non-slave will be erased.

As in the case with Whitman, Lorca’s poetry on the suffering and mistreatment of African Americans can be read as veiled admonitions of his own death anxiety. His idealized conception of the black race, in which their history of passion and rhythm reflects the strong presence of the duende, indicates Lorca’s desire to simultaneously acknowledge death and stave of its effects. Like the flamboyant homosexual who skulks in the dark, the mistreatment and segregation of the African American community represents a failure of America to fulfill the promise of Whitman’s transcendent dream. Lorca again turns to the duende as an alternative to the over-soul. Where Whitman, through the over-soul, eliminates the difference between black and white bodies by imagining one race becoming another, Lorca is unable to adhere to his idealism. Instead, Lorca alleviates his anxiety over the mortality of the body by praising the actions of the body – particularly dance – as a struggle against death.

Early in the process of writing *Poet in New York*, Lorca envisioned an entire book devoted to celebrating the black people of Harlem. This book-length endeavor never came to pass, but Lorca did construct two poems attempting to delve into the mind of the American black person entitled “Standards and Paradise of the Blacks” and “The King of Harlem,” the first poem Lorca is said to have written in the United States (Stainton 222). Both of these poems partly made up a section of *Poet in New York* entitled “The Blacks.” This title sheds light on Lorca’s rather idealized and borderline offensive romantic

stereotyping of the African American race. Lorca, like Whitman, often veers toward diminishing the struggle of the marginalization and persecution in favor of crafting an image of a noble savage. This treatment of the black American is admittedly problematic; however, Lorca's intention is not to stereotype or reduce, but to embolden. Lorca sees in "the Blacks" the American counterpart to the Andalusian gypsy, and parallels the similarities between the two groups; Both the gypsies and the black Americans share a history of persecution at the hands of majority ethnic groups, as well as cultural histories of migration, diaspora and music.

Lorca's fascination with the gypsy, and consequently the African American, stems from his perception that these groups possessed a greater respect and passion towards death due to their histories of persecution. Shulamith Shahar explains that the Spanish history of the gypsy is one fraught with religious and ethnic persecution dating back to the 16th century: "Unified Spain, which was striving to achieve a homogenous and monolithic society, insisted on the 'purity of the blood' ... the baptismal font could not wash away the taint of their origin, and they remained 'others'" (5). Their darker skin, stemming from Indian origin, was thought by early Spanish Christians to symbolize sin and death. Rather than being viewed as their own ethnic group, the gypsies were seen as nomadic tricksters, vagabonds and rogues, a misconception that persisted in the time of Lorca's life (Shahar 12). Despite being the victims of violent atrocities at the hands of the Nazi party during World War II, real human rights work for the gypsies did not take place until the 1990's (Sobotka 137). According to Lorca, this lifetime of struggle and history of prejudicial suffering brought the gypsies metaphorically closer to death, evidenced by the tragic heroism of their culture's song and dance. It is no wonder then

that Lorca looked to both the gypsy and the African American for inspiration in quelling his own anxieties toward death in the duende.

The importance of the bodily struggle against death and its relation to African cultures is made apparent by “Standards and Paradise of the Blacks.” Reminiscent of “Song of Myself” section 13, the poem idealizes the African American form. However, unlike Whitman, Lorca does not chiefly rely on bodily description. Instead, Lorca attempts to delve into the psyche of the African people. The poem opens with a stanza depicting whiteness as a part of the natural order:

They hate the bird’s shadow
on the white cheek’s high tide
and the conflict of light and wind
in the great cold hall of snow (1-4).

Instead of describing the body in physical terms, Lorca turns his attention to the likes, dislikes and actions of the African American. The poem’s depicts white America as an encroaching facet of nature, leaping associatively from the “white cheek” to “light and wind” to “snow.” Images of white pervade the early portions of the poem that detail what the blacks hate.

The poem moves dialectically to what the blacks love, which is naturally not white, but blue, “the deceitful moon of both poles / and water’s bent dance on the shoreline” (11-12). Where Whitman attempts to eliminate opposites, Lorca revels in them to emphasize the importance of their bodily delay of death. The image of water dancing on the shoreline is a typical Lorquian image of duende – the moon beckons the tide to come ashore, but the water never reaches its destination, is continually pulled

back, producing a type of movement that does not actually traverse any distance; in other words, a dance.

Dance becomes the antecedent of the unnamed “it” throughout the poem, and it is this state that is the titular paradise of the blacks. “Standards and Paradise of the Blacks” ends with a final reiteration of dance imagery, this time making the connection between the dance of the water and the body more evident:

It’s there the torsos dream beneath the hungry grass,
there the coral absorbs the ink’s desperation,
the sleepers erase their profiles under the skein of snails
and the emptied space of the dance stays above the last of the ashes
(25-28).

While Lorca has made sporadic references to body parts throughout the poem, this is the first time he draws attention to a literal human torso. By delaying the subject to the last stanza, Lorca amplifies the resonance of the struggle against death this torso is engaged in. The white world, characterized through tropes of struggle, constantly threatens the existence of the blacks, but through the dance they keep death – the last of the ashes – at bay, and remain in their dreamlike paradise.

While “Standards and Paradise of the Blacks” provides a brief meditation on the mindset of the African American community of Harlem, Lorca’s second poetic treatise on the subject, “King of Harlem” is a marked contrast in length, tone, and message. Unlike its counterpart, “King of Harlem” utilizes visceral tropes, notably imagery of blood, in defining the African body. The poem begins by utilizing animals with prominent roles in African mythology, the trickster monkey and fearsome crocodile:

With a spoon
he dug out the crocodiles’ eyes,
and swatted the monkeys on their asses.

With a spoon (1-4).

Lorca begins by establishing the King of Harlem's dominance over his world. In this way, Lorca's depiction of the African man in control over his life echoes Whitman's portrayal of the slave in Section 13 of "Song of Myself." After three stanzas, the poem moves out of this surreal mythologizing of African folk imagery into actual New York geography. In this way, the poem introduces Harlem while making sure it is rooted cleanly in Lorca's conception of the African tradition.

It's necessary to cross the bridges
and reach the murmuring blacks
so the perfume of their lungs
can buffet our temples with its covering
of hot pineapple (17-21).

The bridges here likely refer to the actual bridges Lorca would navigate on his way to Harlem. Emerging from African mythology into the America of the 1920's, Lorca reveals that the oppressive social hierarchy between white and black has reduced the former King to "a prisoner in the uniform of a doorman" (35).

In this context, where the African American man is an oppressed anomaly in a foreign society, Lorca proposes that the residents of Harlem must struggle against the anxiety of inequality through their own bodies. Addressing the black population of Harlem directly, Lorca urges African Americans to spread throughout the city, merging the blood with the landscape itself. Lorca chiefly symbolizes this movement through the image of blood. Moving outward from a literal interpretation of blood as a life source from an individual, Lorca gradually transforms the image of blood into a sentient representation of his perception of black culture. Blood "rages beneath the skin / Alive in the dagger's spine and the landscapes' breast" (54-55) before it "searches a thousand

roads for deaths dusted with flour and ashes of spikenards / rigid, descending skies in which the colonies of planets / can wheel with the litter on the beaches” (57). Lorca’s surrealist leaps become increasingly hard to follow; however, what is clear is that this image of blood is closely linked to Lorca’s anxieties over death.

The African American communities of Harlem gestate feelings of death anxiety in Lorca due to what Lorca perceives as an oppression of the body. For Lorca, the prejudicial station of the gypsy and the African – American, peoples who are characterized by their status as outsider ethnicity or race, is itself a type of death where one’s life, and consequently one’s death, is beyond their control. As demonstrated in Chapter One, Lorca obsessed over his death to the point of crafting for himself numerous self-elegies as an attempt to control his own death. When Lorca views the gypsy and the African-American, he sees groups of people subject to racial majorities that want to strip them of their bodily agency. Lorca foresees a crisis in the African – American community where people do not control their bodies and are forced into the roles of doorman, waiter, maid, and servant. It is fitting, therefore, that Lorca uses tropes of the body to encourage the African-American community to reassert control over their lives, to remember their rich history, and to rebuke fears of death.

Lorca issues a call to African-Americans to reclaim their identity, similar to the call that he issues to homosexuals in “Ode to Walt Whitman.” In that poem, Lorca urged homosexuals to follow the brave and dignified example of Whitman in portraying their sexuality as a loving camaraderie between two men as opposed to lascivious and immoral lust. In “The King of Harlem,” similarly differentiates between a correct and incorrect way of behavior for the African-American: Instead of looking for “some kind of crack /

to find the infinite mask” (90-91), Lorca encourages blacks to look for “the tattooed sun that descends the river and bellows just ahead of the crocodiles” (97-98). Lorca asserts that African-Americans should not play their culturally prescribed roles of indentured servitude, but neither should they simply stay in Harlem. Instead, Lorca encourages the movement of the body, throughout the city, and a reclamation of their African history. Only then, Lorca argues, will they be able to “dance fearlessly at last while the bristling flowers / cut down our Moses in the bulrushes that border heaven” (109-110). For Lorca, resolution of death anxiety always takes the form of a movement, a dance in one place, a rhythmic ritual that both addresses death and keeps the beast at bay.

Chapter 5:

Testing Immortality: The Impact of Civil War on the Immortality

Ideologies of Whitman and Lorca

As Ernest Becker neared his death in 1974, Sam Keen, an editor of *Psychology Today* magazine, visited Becker in his hospital room. He recounts, “The nearness of his death and the severe limits of his energy stripped away the impulse to chatter. We talked about death in the face of death; about evil in the presence of cancer” (Becker xi). In these last moments, Becker confessed that his dying provided what he termed “a test of everything I’ve written about death,” a reification of his philosophy of humanity’s obsession with and fear of death and dying (Becker xi). The very fact that he described his death as a test proves Becker’s theories. Even as Becker neared death, and even though his philosophy spoke against it clearly, he nevertheless strove for a type of immortality. Becker’s theory itself, that all humanity prescribes to certain ideals about immortality in order to soften the pain of death, is itself an ideology. His assertions that all humanity seeks to leave a legacy after death became his own legacy.

Whitman and Lorca faced similar tests in their lives in the form of violent civil wars that challenged their beliefs on the redemptive unity of the over-soul and the tragic heroism of the duende. In the first 1855 preface, prior to the secession of the southern states and the commencement of the American Civil War, Whitman purports to be the

poet who “of all mankind...is the equable man,” asserting that beauty can be found here and now in the American experience (619-20). Whitman presents himself as a paradox; patriotic, yet revolutionary, Whitman speaks for himself and for the nation simultaneously. By tying himself so firmly with the nation, Whitman figuratively avoids death as long as America prospers and thrives. However, after the attack on Fort Sumter, Whitman found himself attempting to be the unifying poet of a split nation.

In Whitman’s Civil War poems, we see a marked shift from early, saber-rattling poems in which Whitman describes the war drums as energizing or patriotic, to later poems that provide sobering lamentations of the trauma of amputations and loss of life. The greatest test for a poet who proclaimed the beauty of the body and its equality with the soul was to see the grim corporeality of the bodies of wounded and dead union soldiers. Jerome Loving recounts how Whitman described his presence in Union camps while searching for his younger brother as “about three days of the greatest suffering of my life” (qtd. in Loving 15). Searching for George, Whitman came upon the tragic repercussions of one of the North’s largest defeats at Fredericksburg. Some regiments lost as many as two thirds of their soldiers, while bodies littered the battlefield three-deep at places (Loving 15). The trauma of the war, of seeing so many young men torn apart and buried, colored the poet’s later work. “Drum-Taps” and subsequent additions made to *Leaves of Grass* are less exclamatory and more meditative than the youthful vibrance of “Song of Myself” and “Calamus.”

The troubling thoughts about the war and death that plagued Whitman are best exemplified by Whitman’s most explicitly violent poem on the American Civil War, “The Wound Dresser.” The poem depicts Whitman as a civilian medic attempting to

console and treat the wounded. As Whitman goes from patient to patient, he has a brief moment of sorrow for a dying man he cannot save. “One turns to me his appealing eyes – poor boy! I never knew you / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you” (37-38). For a poet who earlier wrote unflinchingly about death as a temporary state, a vector through which sexualities and races are made equal, this passage comes across as a striking admission of separateness and finality. At points such as this in the poem, despair seems to almost overtake Whitman – the fear of death manifests in the amputated stump of a soldier: “His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump / And has not yet look’d on it” (48-49).

Despite the overbearing presence of death in the poem, Whitman struggles onward in his quest for unity and wholeness. As a wound-dresser, he takes great pleasure in treating the injuries of the body, of making them whole: “I am faithful, I do not give out / The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen / These and more I dress with impassive hand” (56-58). Through this treatment of the body, Whitman unifies the warring factions of north and south. Because both sides suffered such losses to the body, Whitman describes them as “unsurpas’d heroes” and questions, “was one side so brave? The other was equally brave”(9).

While Whitman at times struggled with the trauma of the loss of human life associated with the American Civil War, he was nonetheless able to consistently maintain the beauty of the soul and the body to soothe his anxieties. Not so with Lorca, whose time in New York seems to have changed him into a more critical and less romantic poet. On Black Tuesday, the date of the Wall Street collapse that ushered the Great Depression, Lorca claimed he saw six suicides. Cruelly, Lorca commented, “This sight gave me a

new vision of American civilization, and I found it all very logical. I don't mean that I liked it. But I watched it all in cold blood, and I am happy I witnessed it" (Stainton 235). To Lorca, the Wall Street collapse vilified his arguments against the rampant spread of urbanization, materialism and inequality he witnessed in New York on a daily basis. He left America in 1930 with a sigh of relief.

Unfortunately, Spain itself was having problems of its own. The financial fallout of the great depression was not limited to America itself, and the years following in Spain were economically scant and politically divisive. When faced with increasing threat of war, Lorca seemed to not avoid death by playing the mediator, as Whitman had done, but instead to actively challenge both sides. There are no poems in *Poet in New York* that actively address the Spanish Civil War, obviously, but in "Abandoned Church (Ballad of the Great War)" Lorca adopts the point of view of a man who has lost his son in a war, and through losing his son, loses his mind. The poem proves that Lorca, ever the pacifist, abhorred the senseless violence of war. After all, if Lorca invokes the duende to enter into an indeterminate dance with death, then he is unlikely to support something that hurries death into finishing the dance too quickly.

When Lorca's dance with the duende came to an abrupt and early end from the gun of a nationalist soldier, Lorca became an icon for intervention in the Spanish Civil War. After his murder, Dali strangely applauded Lorca's death as a kind of supreme masculine act. "The moment I learned of his death," he said, "I cried 'Ole!' That's what a Spaniard says in the presence of a bullfighter who has just executed a particularly successful move before a bleeding beast" (Stainton 459). Meanwhile, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote of his friend's death, "If one had searched diligently, scouring every

corner of the land for someone to sacrifice, to sacrifice as a symbol, one could not have found in anyone or in anything, to the degree it existed in this man who was chosen, the essence of Spain, its vitality and its profundity” (qtd. In Stainton 455-56). To Neruda and many others, Lorca’s death became a galvanizing force in the Spanish Civil War, an event that spurred many into action and caused many to notice the government’s corruption for the first time. The posthumous reinvention of Lorca into a revolutionary figure exemplifies Becker’s notion of the immortality ideology; the survivors romanticize the act of the dying body to continue the legacy of their friend’s spirit, while downplaying their own anxieties over their own mortal bodies.

These romantic conceptualizations of death espoused by Dali, Neruda and Lorca may stem from cultural conceptions of death passed through Spanish history. Lorca remarks, “everywhere else, death is an end. Death comes, and they draw the curtains. Not in Spain. In Spain they open them. Many Spaniards live indoors until the day they die and are taken out in the sunlight. A dead man in Spain is more alive as a dead man than anyplace else in the world” (ISD 64). In these words, taken from “Play and Theory of the Duende,” the evidence of Whitman’s influence is immediate and perhaps more identifiable than in his poetry. Whitman too felt a deep connection with Paumanok, the New York region of his birth. Because of both poets’ affinity with their homelands, their poetry often tried to not only speak for their native lands, but steer them politically. Whitman and Lorca advocated for unified nations through unified bodies – if individuals could outmaneuver death through the over-soul or the duende, then nations could do the same. These beliefs proved idealistic in the face of actual war, resulting in a tempering of

Whitman's rhetoric and the literal death of Lorca. Where both poets imagined a life without end, reality was able to provide one.

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