

DOUG ASHFORD

A few verses from “Song of the Open Road” by Walt Whitman, a poet cited by Justice William O. Douglas in the majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Papachristou v. City of Jacksonville*, 405 U.S. 156 (1972), overturning the anti-loitering laws of that Florida city as vague and un-American. This decision has affected the free movement of Americans ever since, and has been periodically under attack:

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The earth expanding right hand and left hand,
 The picture alive, every part in its best light,
 The music falling in where it is wanted, and stopping where it is not wanted,
 The cheerful voice of the public road, the gay fresh sentiment of the road.

O highway I travel, do you say to me Do not leave me?
 Do you say Venture not—if you leave me you are lost?
 Do you say I am already prepared, I am well-beaten and undenied, adhere
 to me?

O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you,
 You express me better than I can express myself,
 You shall be more to me than my poem.

I think heroic deeds were all conceiv'd in the open air, and all free poems
 also,
 I think I could stop here myself and do miracles,
 I think whatever I shall meet on the road I shall like, and whoever beholds
 me shall like me,
 I think whoever I see must be happy.

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From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
 Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
 Listening to others, considering well what they say,
 Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
 Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would
 hold me.

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine,
and the north and the south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.

All seems beautiful to me,
I can repeat over to men and women You have done such good to me
I would do the same to you,
I will recruit for myself and you as I go,
I will scatter myself among men and women as I go,
I will toss a new gladness and roughness among them,
Whoever denies me it shall not trouble me,
Whoever accepts me he or she shall be blessed and shall bless me.

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Now if a thousand perfect men were to appear it would not amaze me,
Now if a thousand beautiful forms of women appear'd it would not aston-
ish me.

Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.

Here a great personal deed has room,
(Such a deed seizes upon the hearts of the whole race of men,
Its effusion of strength and will overwhelms law and mocks all authority and
all argument against it.)

Here is the test of wisdom,
Wisdom is not finally tested in schools,
Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it,
Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof,
Applies to all stages and objects and qualities and is content,
Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence
of things;
Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it out of
the soul.

Now I re-examine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious
clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents.



Mark Read. Occupy “Bat Signal” projected on the Verizon building in lower Manhattan. November 17, 2011. Photograph by Davey Davis.

Here is realization,
 Here is a man tallied—he realizes here what he has in him,
 The past, the future, majesty, love—if they are vacant of you, you
 are vacant of them.

Only the kernel of every object nourishes;
 Where is he who tears off the husks for you and me?
 Where is he that undoes stratagems and envelopes for you and me?

Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion’d, it is apropos;
 Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?
 Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls?

DOUG ASHFORD teaches at the Cooper Union. His paintings were most recently installed at Documenta 13.