

The Poetics of a New Science: “Song of Myself” as Sociology

In 1930, the Walt Whitman Fellowship of Chicago tapped Robert Ezra Park—the country’s premier sociologist—as keynote lecturer at their annual celebration of America’s poet. “It is a long time since I have read Walt Whitman,” the elder Park confessed, though he was “once not merely a reader but more or less a devout follower” (“Walt Whitman”). Among the discipline’s foundational thinkers, Park presided over the University of Chicago’s Department of Sociology during the period (1914-1933) in which that institution, the “Chicago School,” was practically synonymous with the field. So it’s no coincidence he came of age in the final years of Whitman’s life, when the poet’s most devout followers were transforming *Leaves of Grass* into social theory. Indeed, as nineteenth-century “Social Science” developed from reform movements and cohered in university disciplines,—a trajectory consistent with Whitman’s own celebrity—his poetry, especially “Song of Myself,” became a resource for the budding science of sociology.

Park addressed this intellectual history at the Chicago Fellowship, reciting a “few familiar lines which—of all that Whitman ever wrote”—defined his “present attitude toward life”:

I think I could turn and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contain’d,
I stand and look at them long and long,
They do not sweat and whine about their
condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for
their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty
to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented
with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth. (“Walt”)

The excerpt, from section thirty two of “Song of Myself” (after its partitioning in the 1867 *Leaves*), connotes a peculiar “attitude” for a lifelong researcher of human relations.¹ A rare moment in the journey of “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s “I”—fed up with the inanity of social discourse—considers abandoning his grand project of poetic absorption to (re)turn and live in animal contentment, free of social norms, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions. It is, Park explained, it is “precisely what characterizes human nature, as human...that the poet here repudiates. Forms, institutions—it is just these characteristic human qualities upon which property, government, morality, and religion rest. If there were no conditions to whine about there would be no world to reform” (“Walt”). Reading sociology into “Song of Myself,” Park envisages social conflict as an unfortunate but altogether human inevitability, our naïve solidarity perpetually lost through historical contact and development. Walt Whitman, the poet of social experience, becomes a sociologist-*avant la lettre*.

Ultimately, Park’s confession—that he had not read Whitman in years—is belied by the recurrence of “Song of Myself” in sociology publications throughout his career. As the range of issues Park studied defined the contours of the modern discipline,—from mass media and social

psychology to urban ecology and race relations—Walt Whitman and “Song of Myself” consistently furnished imagery to illustrate the basic processes of human development. In the following chapter, I offer a survey of such interpretive reprintings of “Song of Myself” across the early American social sciences—from monographs and manifestos, academic journals and little magazines—to revive this neglected afterlife of Walt Whitman, sociologist. Part institutional history, part reception study, my project builds upon Meredith McGill’s landmark research on literary reprinting to map the routes “Song of Myself” traveled among this reading community of nascent U.S. sociologists.² Joining the ever-growing scholarship on Whitman’s readers, led by Bryan Garman and Michael Robertson, this “reception history” winds through the work of some of his forgotten enthusiasts—Progressive Era academics like Daniel Brinton, Edward Ross, Oscar Triggs, and Robert Park—and places Whitman at the ideological “making” of early American sociology (Mailloux 100).

The Foreground of Social Science and “Song of Myself”

In the nineteenth century, “Social Science” named the merger of European social philosophies—St. Simon and Comte in France, Mill and Spencer in England, the German Hegelians—with homegrown reform movements in the United States. Uniting these tendencies was the belief that, through observation and reason, “scientific” laws would evolve and help guide human beings towards a more just social order. Sociology turned on the idea that humanity was the agent of its own history, that social institutions, norms, and actions were at least as responsible for the fate of an individual or a people as was divinity or nature. These new philosophies co-emerged with the “modernist” historicity—the understanding that present circumstances comprised a radical break with the past. As historian Dorothy Ross explains, social science originated to “understand the

character and future” of modernity “premised on a decisive difference between modern society and its feudal and ancient forerunners” (3). Once history became intelligible in terms of human actions, the laws of causation linking past, present, and future were likewise knowable.

Underwriting this new science of social progress were advances in the theory of evolution. While Whitman culled his own evolutionary faith from a *mélange* of sources,—transcendentalism, German Idealism, Eastern religions—he was receptive to the idea that social life unfolded in patterns discernible by science.

When the new social thought migrated to America by way of lectures, reviews, and reprints, it met favorably with Whitman, who was already writing examining in journalism, fiction, and poetry the social questions that challenged and framed the very possibilities of a liberal society. But as Rita Felski claims, literature thrives only by “creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments” (584). So, in the waning years of his life and beyond, Whitman’s most fervent supporters began republishing his work for the task. In 1890, literary confidant Horace Traubel started the *Conservator* magazine, the “semiofficial public voice” of Whitman’s disciples (Schmidgall xxii). Reprinting and vending *Leaves of Grass* alongside the works of Marx, Spencer, and Veblen, Traubel’s periodical placed Whitman in direct contact with sociology’s leading lights and their doctrines. Traubel also devised and sustained the Walt Whitman Fellowship International, the literary society that, according to Michael Robertson, doubled as political stomping grounds for a host of “North American cultural radicals” (“Reading” 18). Around Whitman’s name formed social movement veterans like NAACP co-founder William English Walling, anarchist Emma Goldman, civil lawyer Clarence Darrow and some of the academy’s earliest social scientists—Kelly Miller, Robert Park, and Daniel Garrison Brinton.

“Song of Myself” and The New Anthropology

“Song of Myself” broke into the social sciences just prior to Whitman’s death, through the early writings of academic anthropology. Therein, the relationships Whitman forged with two of the discipline’s founders, Frank Baker and Daniel Brinton, provide a necessary critical backdrop. Beginning in the 1880s, Brinton—then the nation’s “leading ethnologic critic” —often crossed the Delaware River from his post at the University of Pennsylvania to call on the elderly Whitman in Camden (“Daniel Garrison” 40). Whitman was captivated by ethnology, the science that aspired to encompass the whole panorama of human types, just as he had in verse. Indeed, Brinton had spent a career examining ethnic groups and literatures as an antiquarian researcher while presiding over a range of disciplinary groups, including the American Folklore Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and, naturally, the Walt Whitman Fellowship (Darnell 16). As he made Whitman’s acquaintance, Brinton was actively lecturing and publishing on indigenous language and folklore, and thus forming the core vocabulary and methodology of this new racial science.

Their intellectual partnership ultimately paved the entryway for “Song of Myself” into the social sciences. In October of 1890, a variation of the poem’s section thirty two served as lead epigraph in Brinton’s *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association. The excerpt from the 1855 *Leaves* was printed below the Darwin-alluding title essay “The Ascent of Man,”—a treatise on the development of the human races:

I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals—they are so placid
and self-contained

...

They bring me tokens of myself
I do not know where they got these tokens,
I must have passed that way untold times ago and negligently dropped
 them,
Myself moving forward then and now and forever (297).

The author was Brinton's colleague Frank Baker, a medical practitioner turned academic—the prototype of the fin-de-siècle social scientist. A Union veteran, he remained in Washington, D.C. after the Civil War, where he taught at Georgetown University and, perhaps inevitably, befriended Whitman at the home of William Douglas O'Connor (Allen 301). The bond between the poet of the body and the budding anthropologist endured to the end of Whitman's life.

Thus Whitman's poem commenced this introductory lecture on the emergent field of "anthropology," the "comprehensive study of man," as Baker described the ambitious young science (297). Bearing the birthmark of nineteenth-century grand narratives, anthropology sought to synchronize, as he put it, the "general results" of "sub-ordinate branches" of scientific knowledge—biology, philology, archaeology—to apprehend the human in "his origin, his development, and his present condition" (297-298). Here "Song of Myself" illuminates the discipline's metaphysical underpinnings. For anthropologists, evolutionary levels of "civilization" could be identified and measured by cultural deposits stored in the languages, laws, and bodies of a people—in books as readily as bone structures. An anatomist by trade, Baker surveyed the muscles, organs, skulls, and spines of various species and human races, pointing out how infrequently-used body parts tended to "revert to the type shown in most lower animals"—physical differences he registered as racial grades (300). Baker emphasized the

“peculiar ape-like form of... people of the stone-age, in the mound-builders and in some American Indians,” a popular atavistic logic linking indigenous peoples in body and culture with prehistoric “lower” races (305).

Whitman’s “evolutionary passage,” as David Charles Leonard terms it, where the poet’s “persona travels at will not only forward, but also backward...[to] reconnect...with his previous tokens of animality,” proves an appropriate guide (24). Evolution reveals the primordial linkages between human and non-human, authorizing Whitman’s “I” to travel through deep genealogical time. Baker’s Whitman merely reflects the most current science, where evolution replaces the grand ideas, heroes, and spirits of progress’ pasts with new catalysts: reproductive success and environmental adaptation. Indeed, the philosopher who redefined evolution on these terms, French naturalist Jean Baptiste Lamarck, famously posited that acquired traits were preserved and transmitted through reproduction. His understanding of evolution proved so popular that “Lamarckism,” as George Stocking argued, became the commonsense “scientific attitude” of the century (242).

It is little wonder, then, that Frank Baker embraced Whitman *and* the “views propounded by Lamarck,” now “remarkably confirmed in modern times” by anthropology (299). The “human body abounds in testimony,” Baker argues, “indications of the pathway by which humanity has climbed from darkness to light, from bestiality to civilization” (299). Recontextualized by Baker, Whitman’s subject from the passage’s final line, “Myself,” ordinarily capacious enough to absorb any speaker, becomes explicitly raced, a cultural and biological white standard set apart from descending “tokens” of its savage pasts: African, indigenous, animal. Against the Lamarckian background cast by anthropology, Whitman’s “I” is less a cosmic time traveler than the very subjectivity of the ethnologist, examining evolutionary scales according to anatomical

dimension. He does not move between species as much as trace levels up-and-down an ethnological chart. His “persona,” in this sense, seeks tokens as evidence of racial success, the traits that landed him at the top of the chain.

Lamarck’s evolutionary conviction resonates through Whitman’s own Reconstruction-era notions of race. In fact, it is Whitman’s enthusiasm for ethnology that scholars fall back on to explain the poet’s distasteful racism *and* his friendship with Brinton.³ In the ensuing century, however, anthropology was dominated by Brinton’s competitor, Franz Boas, and a more egalitarian theory of cultural relativism. In the meantime, Baker and Brinton’s work aged poorly, unlike that of Whitman, whose celebrity among anthropologists only matured in the next century, when a host of Boas-inspired intellectuals—from Ruth Benedict and Edward Sapir to Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne—anoointed him the voice of a modern American culture.

“Song of Myself” and Social Control

At the turn of the century, as evolution was further infused with the currents of culture, Whitman and “Song of Myself” gained a foothold in the rising tides of sociology. At the time, the new American Studies had already grasped these vital connections. Vernon Parrington argued that nineteenth-century America had “taken kindly to sociology,” where the “influence of transcendentalism” logically extended to “Walt Whitman, dreaming amidst the formless crowds of Manhattan”—his urban exploration prefiguring the practices of Park’s Chicago School (189, 197). Likewise, Van Wyck Brooks depicted sociologists as the intellectual stepchildren of the American Renaissance. He imagined how in *Leaves of Grass* they encountered the “dawning conception of evolution” transmuted into “the feeling of ‘cosmic continuity’...much in the air of

the time and largely inspired the sociology of Lester F. Ward” (177, 184). Like so, antebellum social critique became modern sociology—Whitman, a poet, forerunner to Ward, the inaugural president of the American Sociological Association.

In 1892, Whitman passed away and the University of Chicago was born, as if to signal a fundamental transition in the social sciences—from activist poetics to professional knowledge. The university, established by Chautauqua promoter Rainey Harper and located in the thick of the settlement house movement, swiftly became the hub of social science research and thus the institutional emblem of the Progressive ethos. Dedicated to scholarly inquiry and practical reform, Chicago featured one of the first graduate departments in Sociology and formed the discipline’s first academic periodical, the *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)* in 1895. The new flagship journal published and reviewed the field’s essential works, as intended by its founder, Albion Small. As Chicago’s faculty chair, Small envisioned *AJS* as a “scientific journal of Sociology,” a means to separate academic work from activism—to “discredit” the latter as “pseudo-sociology” (“Small to Harper”). Yet in those very same pages, in Edward A. Ross’ foundational essays on “social control”—the crowning concept of the fledgling social science—“Song of Myself” made its sociological debut.

Ross’ *Social Control*—published serially (from 1896-1900) in the earliest volumes of *AJS*—became one of discipline’s first scholarly monographs in 1901. Therein, Ross theorized the regulatory capacity of social norms. As he saw it, modern “social control” operated beyond the more ancient and explicit authorities of church and state; diffused and processual, it worked through the “films, veils, hidden mirrors, and half-lights by which men are duped as to that which lies nearest them – their own experience” (January 1898: 502). At times, social control *was* patent, as in the institutions of the family and school, but it often worked reflexively, framed

by the runaway rationalism of the modern age. For Ross, the sociologist was tasked with revealing these ineffable mechanisms of social control by observing societal currents with an eye towards reviving humanity's natural "instinct," the "social point of view" (519). The liberal individualism of the modern era, though a vital reaction to the concentrated authority of the Church, had, according to Ross, made "freedom...a passion, laissez faire a dogma, skepticism a religion, and ethics a development of control" (May 1898: 818). This epistemic break between the religious past and secular present so violently unmoored social relations that humanity lost the "wholesome unconsciousness and outlook which is the birthright of healthy beings" (818). As older communal forms dissolved and led to "new forms of union," such as the "bonds of fellowship growing up between co-religionists, fellow-craftsmen, or people of the same social class," these arrangements, deliberately fostered, risked constant attrition (813-814). Ross longed, instead, for spontaneous relations with the world.

To illustrate his vision, he turned social science over to literary analysis. If modern society required a "frank, communal feeling," it might "echo the sentiment of Walt Whitman" (818). Accordingly, Ross offered "Song of Myself," that evolutionary passage where Whitman seeks to "turn and live with animals," who, never "demented with the mania of owning things," are thus never "unhappy" over "the whole earth." (qtd. 818-819). Whitman's evolutionary regression prompts a nostalgic harmony, one that might supplant the psychic fragmentation of modern America. The animalistic, prehistoric cosmos which compelled Baker to measure anatomical advance as racial progress, here sheds light on human alienation, crystallizing, in the process, sociology's fundamental subject: the atomized individual vis-à-vis society.

But again, not just anyone arrives at this realization. Ross insisted that his "science [keep] itself half esoteric"; for the expert "social investigator," "the secret of order is...not to be bawled

from every housetop” (820). Unlike Whitman’s half-esoteric poem, its “untranslatable” “yawp” sounded “over the roofs of the world” to empower readers with interpretive agency, Ross maintained the righteous authority of sociologists (*Poetry* 247). Only “men of widest horizon and farthest vision,” Ross maintained, “may safely be intrusted with the secrets of control” (820). With literary analyses undergirding scientific maxims, Ross appropriates for the sociologist the empathetic vision and cultural import Whitman reserved for the poet. Sociologists form, like Whitman’s “I,” “general principles from the vantage ground of...conflicting pretensions,” to identify and critique the discipline’s deep antagonism: the “opposition of the individual and society” (823). Steeped in the gathering energies of academic professionalism,—the scholar now usurping the poet, as Whitman once saw the bard replacing the priest—Ross found poetry a timely sociological medium. As the language of the social sciences filtered back into sphere of social reform, “Song of Myself” would only continue to accrue sociological heft.

“Song of Myself” and the Herbert Spencer-Walt Whitman Center

When “Song of Myself” wound back into sociological discourse, it came from the margins of reform and through the pages of *To-Morrow Magazine*, the journal of Chicago’s “Herbert Spencer-Walt Whitman Center.” Founded in 1905, *To-Morrow*—a “progressive magazine for people who think”—proudly endorsed “bringing the names of the great philosopher and the great poet into a...single meaning” (Oct. 1905: 11). Their merger in the Spencer-Whitman Center expressed “two ways of arriving at an important sociological truth; that mankind is a unity of individualities, developed through evolutionary process” (11-12). In a cultural moment marked by the excesses of monopoly capitalism and positive science, the “Spencer-Whitmanites” rendered explicit this strange intellectual fusion—the poet of evolutionary democracy/the

philosopher of evolutionary liberalism—already coalescing as the conceptual bedrock of American sociology.

Before turning to their unique explication of “Song of Myself,” it is crucial to see the process by which the period’s activists transformed and returned sociological concepts in the sphere of reform back into the hallowed academy. Thus the story of the Spencer-Whitman Center began among the social welfare projects and craft labor movement of Chicago. By the time the Center opened in 1905, its broad-shouldered city, already the epicenter of Midwestern commerce, had been rocked by decades of violent labor unrest. Working within and against a milieu of urban poverty and social strife, activists at the University of Chicago promoted institutional, scientific solutions, establishing extension courses and contributing resources to settlement houses. At the time, all practitioners of social welfare, whether activist professors such as Oscar Lovell Triggs or reform-minded intellectuals like Jane Addams, claimed the title “sociologist.” Opposed to exploitation in principle,—and seeking reconciliation over class struggle—settlement house sociologists sought to redeem the working classes by restoring the imagined republican value of hard work. So the Spencer-Whitman Center, composed largely of a would-be professional class,—professors, entrepreneurs, writers—championed the arts and craft ideal. Of course, Whitman’s work made appropriate ballast for their navigation of the era’s fluid conceptions of labor and class.⁴

As Whitman was being repurposed for labor reform, *Leaves of Grass* entered academia proper. In an 1895 issue of the *Conservator*, Chicago undergraduate Hamlin Garland wrote in extolling the “lecture” course “Whitman as Poet, Thinker and Man” taught by “professor [Oscar Lovell] Triggs,” proof that at least “one university in America had recognized the power and inclusiveness of Whitman’s work” (60-61). Besides the stimuli from settlement houses and

organized labor, the arts and crafts movement received much of its energy through the pen of Triggs. Raised in small town Illinois, Oscar L. Triggs received his English PhD at the University of Chicago, where he taught until 1904 (Tyrer 746, Boris 207). A committed activist and cultural worker, Triggs is, as John Roche states, probably “most notable for the discrepancy between his importance then and obscurity now” (99). Promoting Whitman as a socialist poet,—a kind of western complement to Traubel—he mobilized craft laborers through the language of *Leaves*. Between 1898 and 1904, Triggs wrote *A History of the Arts and Crafts Movement* and co-edited the *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*. He published frequently in arts and crafts magazines while contributing articles on Whitman to literary periodicals, uniting and enriching two prolific discourses of Progressive Era radicalism. In addition, Triggs founded the Western Branch of the Whitman Fellowship—where Robert Park later rhapsodized on “Song of Myself” as a star of academic sociology.

In 1905, Triggs launched the forum for the eventual Spencer-Whitman Center, *To-Morrow Magazine*. Billed as the “Monthly Hand-book of the Changing Order,” the periodical was awash in arts and crafts and other therapeutic reform efforts, inundated with promotions for self-betterment courses, health advice, and lecture schedules (Jan 1905: 1). In the “clubbing section,” readers could purchase works from “Prophetic Writers”—a canon that included Morris, Veblen, and, of course, Spencer and Whitman. Just months after its launch, however, Triggs left *To-Morrow* to join Upton Sinclair’s Intercollegiate Socialist Society. He bequeathed the editorship to his friend Parker H. Sercombe, who carried on his mission to resolve all social ills within the vast intellectual cosmos of the Spencer-Whitman Center’s namesakes.

An otherwise idiosyncratic figure, Sercombe’s trajectory is almost typical of the progressive reformer. He was an enterprising businessman who renounced capitalism, but never

his salary. He maintained ties with anarchists, academics, and industrial magnates; he edited journals, contributed articles, and printed pamphlets in the burgeoning network of left-wing publishers. Lambasted in the press for his exhortatory idealism, branded a cult leader and a free lover, Sercombe remained recognized and respected. He published in the *Overland Monthly* as a “Sociologist,” lectured at universities and union halls, and even spoke before Congress on the merits of a national health service. He reflects the intellectual and political malleability of an era with far-reaching social questions boasting an even wider spectrum of solutions.

Under his tutelage, *To-Morrow* placed Whitman’s poems in constant conversation with the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. In one editorial, he called on readers to study society according to “the Synthetic Philosophy of Herbert Spencer and the Cosmic insight of Walt Whitman,” explaining that this “Spencer-Whitman mental attitude” demanded “all human activities [be] studied from the objective point of view, as scientists study the ant hill, the bee hive, the mind of a child or the nebular hypothesis” (November 1905: 35). It is critical here to stress how vital Herbert Spencer’s “objective point of view” was to the intellectual life of nineteenth-century America. Charles Horton Cooley remembered how all “who took up sociology between 1870...and 1890 did so at the instigation of Spencer” (129). According to T. Jackson Lears, the era’s “belief that the entire universe—including all human life—was governed by deterministic laws,” made an opportune setting for Spencer’s biological fatalism (20). Like Whitman, Spencer was broad, reassuring, and appropriable; so he offered progressives, on the lecture circuit and in the college classroom, an objective framework for social critique.

The great irony here is that Spencer, the philosophical lodestone of survival-of-the-fittest liberalism, promulgated an economic theory directly opposed to artisan socialism. According to

biographer Mark Francis, Spencer's ideal was "not the classical one of philosophically transformed individuals living compatibly with others: but the modern scientific view of the individual as a biological unit embedded in nature,...developed from a simple to a specialized form" (257). Spencer grounded "man" in natural science, not romantic philosophy. Freedom and equality were not essential human capacities recognized through cultural development, but evolutionary characteristics attained through society's natural, adaptive progressions. That early sociological practice adhered to Spencer makes sense; so too that those same practitioners, in searching for a national voice, found Whitman's to be an attractive one. Even if the compound—the poet of republican democracy/the theorist of social Darwinism—appeared volatile, their synthesis actively reconciled (or outright ignored) any discrepancy.

Sercombe's conflation of *Leaves of Grass* with Spencerian sociology provides important context for the group's reprinting of "Song of Myself." In *To-Morrow*, Sercombe argued that Whitman's desire to "turn and live with animals" contained the "marvelous cosmic insight and ability to see things as they are instead of seeing them as he was told by his parents" (Oct. 1905: 11). Here Sercombe's literary exegesis contains clear reverberations from the likes of E.A. Ross. Even in *To-Morrow*'s first editorial, Triggs had listed "legislatures," "universities," and "newspapers" as so many "cultural agencies" of "social control" (Jan. 1905: 18). Taking the reins, Sercombe offers "Song of Myself" as a thought experiment, an effort to circumvent the indoctrinating reaches of social control by returning to the primal consciousness of animal nature and, in turn, restaging the processes of socialization. As Whitman's "I" stares deep into the evolutionary past, he venerates the animals' eternal present, one free of earthly concerns like religion, education, and even moral sense, all the oppressive machinery of social control. For

Sercombe, this evolutionary reversal positions the reader in a pre-political space, estranging the otherwise “natural” operations of society.

Consequently, Sercombe’s “Song of Myself” contains a valuable fantasy for the sociologist: the capacity to recognize the contingency of any “I” through its projection in the imagined lives of others. If Ross called upon “Song of Myself” to reconstruct social norms from the molecular level, then Sercombe restates his project in the obverse. For him, Whitman refuses the impersonal distance of a cold-hearted social system, retaining a naïve complex of empathy and detachment. The sociologist, like Whitman, must refuse to pass judgment on any contingent formation of conflict. Inscribed in its very name, the Spencer-Whitman Center thus hypostatized the social sciences as arbiters of social conflict and change, embodying the unique combination at the heart of a new American sociology: evolutionary promise and ecumenical compassion.

“Song of Myself” and the Chicago School

That Robert Park came to address the Fellowship founded by the Spencer-Whitman Center and recited that same section of “Song of Myself” seems now inevitable. The country’s leading social theorist was only etching the poem into a deep tradition of sociological reprinting. By 1930, Park recalled his earliest encounter with *Leaves of Grass*, like confronting “a new type of man; a man who had broken with tradition but had found, nevertheless, a new vocation and a new faith” (“Walt”). When Park departed his Minnesota hometown to attend the University of Michigan (BA) and then Harvard University (MA), he went on to study under two more great readers of Whitman: John Dewey and William James.⁵ Drawn in his youth to poetic independence, immersed in the social psychology of American Pragmatism as a maturing

intellectual, it is only natural that Park returned to Whitman again and again to illustrate his fundamental notion of human nature.

An eclectic thinker, Park revised his methods constantly across the various essays and reviews that comprise the bulk of his published writing. Consistent throughout the corpus, however, was his understanding of sociology as the “description and explanation” of human cultures (Lal 27). Due in part to the ascension of Boas, who shifted scholarly attention from human biology to emphases on lifeways and communication, Park accepted culture as the determining factor in social interactions. He never abandoned the basic model of evolution, but it became, as James McKee argues, the framework of his “contrasting typology of modern and premodern forms of human association” (104). Sociology’s central purpose was to flesh out the cultural processes that facilitated these developments.

Throughout his career,—amid global depressions, warfare, and ethnic genocide—Park aspired to figure human relationships on a basic level, stripped of social distinctions. He mobilized “Song of Myself” to grapple with the discipline’s *ur*-conflict: the influence of social institutions *vis-à-vis* biological inheritance. It is one thing to read Whitman in a commemorative speech, but Park recurrently reprinted “Song of Myself” to build on and clarify his sociological research. The earliest instance came in his iconic urban study, *The City*. In one chapter therein, Park profiled the juvenile delinquent, a social type antithetical to the same conditions Whitman longed to abandon in “Song of Myself.” In contrast with “lower animals,” humans occupy, according to Park, an environment “made up of the experience and memories and the acquired habits of the people who have preceded them,” which, through time, become “crystallized and embodied in tradition” (53). Delinquents, isolated from society for refusing to comport with established customs, construct personalities to contest those dominant values. In “Song of

Myself,” Whitman’s desire to “turn and live with animals,” rather than cope with the complicated rules of social interaction granted Park imagery by which to place the delinquent in contraposition to modern social norms (57).

Park reused “Song of Myself” two years later in the *AJS* essay “Human Nature and Collective Behavior.” Reflecting again on the unspoken mechanisms governing human interaction, the “social pattern” of habits and beliefs “institutionalized in customs and traditions,” here Park reasons that the socialized individual inherits “from a long series of his animal ancestors the potentialities...realized in specific characters,” just as Whitman’s poetry imagines the vast fund of social potentials that comprise any given “I” (*Society* 15-16). Clarifying the influence of tradition on human action, Park contends that “lower animals have neither words nor symbols; ...they do not organize processions and carry banners; they sing...but they do not celebrate” (17). Recasting the opening line of “Song of Myself”—“I celebrate myself and sing myself,” Park distinguishes between “socializing,” song as a ritual, and physically expanding and contracting the vocal chords. An animal sings without drawing on a network of traditions; the human celebrates a past.

On cue, Park cites section thirty two, indicating that animals “‘do not,’ as Walt Whitman has put it, ‘sweat and whine about their condition’...‘over the whole earth there is not one that is respectable or unhappy’” (17). He unpacks the verse in a similar fashion, arguing that sociality is a fundamental trait that cannot be escaped but to imaginatively retreat and “live with animals,” that is, return to an evolutionary stage prior to communication. What Whitman is “sick” of, according to Park, is “most characteristic of human nature and human behavior. For man is a creature such that when he lives at all, he lives in his imagination, and, through his imagination in the minds of other men” (17). “Song of Myself,” as a tableau of customs and experiences,

envisions life, as Park put it, purely through the imaginations of others. What Whitman's song finally celebrates is the social self, an awareness and embrace of the inherent flux of personality.

Finally, a year after his fellowship lecture, Park made recourse to Whitman again, this time in a treatise on Behaviorism, "Human Nature, Attitudes and Mores." Popularized by B.F. Skinner, Behaviorism originated in direct response to Park's brand of social psychology, criticizing its appeal to internal states of consciousness as too impressionistic. Skinner held that human behavior should be treated like any other animal's, as psychic reactions to surrounding environments. For Park, the Behaviorists were misguided, for while it is "difficult to distinguish between original nature and human nature," certain human sentiments were "so obviously different from animal behavior that they seem to be difference not merely of degree, but of kind" (*Society* 273-274). To illustrate, he called on some "oblique observations on the human race, ...one of Walt Whitman's earlier and more flagrant examples of free verse, *Song of Myself*" (274).

Park reiterates: the social annoyances Whitman catalogues as "fundamentally human," are those "upon which the social situations—economic, political, and religious—seem finally to rest and from which there is no escape for man, except, as Whitman puts it, he turn and live with the animals" (274). Refuting Behaviorism, Park looked to "Song of Myself" to redeem social institutions. By bringing animals flush with the human present for nostalgic reflection, rendering our nature socially constituted and distinct from biological origins, Whitman expressed states of human thought uncaptureable in overt behaviors. Contra Skinner's doctrine placing animal and human conduct on a predictable continuum, "Song of Myself" reveals sociality as the original nature of being human—the founding gesture of sociology.

Repitching Robert Park's intellectual journey as a reception study of "Song of Myself"

revives an oft-ignored aspect of the sociologist's career. Like Whitman's activist readers, what finally animated Park was the desire to see human companionship amid the fragmentation of modern life. In the decades between Whitmanesque rebellion and sociological tolerance, as Park became a professional observer of human nature, he also became a more sophisticated reader of society. His new mood demanded a new Whitman. Thus the final passage of Park's fellowship lecture reflected again on his favorite poetic extract, admitting despite his cynicism "this saving fact":

After all that is characteristically and exclusively human has been surrendered or sloughed off—there remains the affections that hold men together—and make life worth living. These, however, we share with animals...[and] these affections between man and man...finally make life worth living. So Whitman, at least, seems to have thought. ("Walt")

Park comes full circle: employing Whitman to penetrate the human condition for a feeling that might "make life worth living," still the central task of sociology. While he spent a lifetime trumpeting his discipline as scientific, Park concluded: "It is to such sources—to poetry I mean, and not to science—that we still go—even in this scientific age—for inspiration" ("Walt"). This was especially true of "Song of Myself," a poem that moved this leader of sociology in the age of social science so inspired by his work.

Coda: "Song of Myself" and the Sociology *in* Literature

Walt Whitman understood, more acutely than most, the social politics of reading. After all, he staked the future of the republic and *Leaves of Grass* on the cultivation of strong and

inventive readers. The rich history of Whitman reception studies testifies to the many readers-to-come inspired to speak back in poetry, fiction, art, and even social science. As contemporary book studies and textual digitization continues to reinvigorate bibliographical work, it fills out the dossiers of literary influence. Just as a focus on the material practices of reading have displaced the old intuitive “patterns” of scholarly eyes, these reprintings of “Song of Myself” across the social sciences provide hard evidence to place Whitman firmly at the matrix of sociology.

As an influence, Whitman, of course, was not alone. Shawn Chandler Bingham argues that Henry David Thoreau’s responses to the range of nineteenth-century social problems compel us to rethink sociology as a humanistic “craft,” thus re-crossing the once porous borders between the humanities and the social sciences (115). In a similar vein, David Alworth investigates sociologist Erving Goffman’s engagement with Herman Melville’s *White-Jacket*, where, in using choice passages to explicate his own ideas, Goffman refigures Melville as a “quasi-sociologist” (22). Alworth finally calls for a similar critical approach: joining *with* literature to formulate social critiques rather than positing literary texts as social products in need of ideological deconstruction. Seeing Whitman routinely marshalled into service for the social sciences, Alworth’s desire to seek out the sociology *in* literature might just restore the discipline’s founding impulse along with Whitman’s vision of “a new world of democratic sociology and imaginative literature” (*Poetry* 992).

Bibliography

- Allen, Gay Wilson. *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*. New York University Press, 1975.
- Alworth, David J. "Melville in the Asylum: Literature, Sociology, Reading." *American Literary History*. 26.2 (2014): 234–261.
- Baker, Frank. "The Ascent of Man." *American Anthropologist* 3.4 (Oct. 1890): 297-320.
- Bedichek, Roy. *Letters of Roy Bedichek*. Eds., William A. Owens and Lyman Grant. mail Berry, Wendell. *Citizenship Papers*. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003.
- Bingham, Shawn Chandler. *Thoreau and the Sociological Imagination: The Wilds of Society*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.
- Boris, Eileen. *Art and Labor*. Temple UP, 1986.
- Brooks, Van Wyck. *The Times of Melville and Whitman*. E. P. Dutton, 1947.
- Cooley, Charles Horton. "Reflections upon the sociology of Herbert Spencer." *American Journal of Sociology* 26 (1920): 129-145
- "Daniel Garrison Brinton Memorial Meeting." American Philosophical Society, 1900.
- Darnell, Regna. *Daniel Garrison Brinton*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.
- Felski, Rita. "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 573-591.
- Francis, Mark. *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life*. Cornell UP, 2007.
- Garland, Hamlin. "Whitman and Chicago University." *Conservator* 6 (June 1895): 60-61.
- Garman, Bryan. *Race of Singers: Whitman's Working Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Hutchinson, George. "Racial Attitudes." J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. Garland, 1998.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric: An Ordinary Language Approach*. Southern Illinois UP, 2005.
- Lal, Barbara Ballis. *The Romance of Culture in an Urban Civilization: Robert E. Park on Race and Ethnic Relations in Cities*. Routledge, 1990.
- Lears, T. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. Pantheon, 1981.
- Leonard, David Charles. "Lamarckian Evolution in Song of Myself." *The Walt Whitman Review* 24 (1978): 21-28.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*. Cornell UP, 1998.
- McGill, Meredith L. "Walt Whitman and the Poetics of Reprinting." Eds. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson. *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*. University of Iowa Press, 2008: 37-58.
- McKee, James B. *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*. University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton UP, 1994.
- Omidisalar, Alejandro; Palmer, Ashley; Blalock, Stephanie M.; Cohen, Matt. "Walt Whitman's Poetry Reprints and the Study of Nineteenth-Century Literary Circulation." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (2017), 1-44.
- Park, Robert E. *Society*. The Free Press, 1955.

- . "Walt Whitman." Robert Ezra Park Collection, Box 6, Folder 6, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.
- Park, Robert E., R. D. McKenzie and Ernest Burgess. *The City: Suggestions for the Study of Human Nature in the Urban Environment*. University of Chicago Press, 1925.
- Parrington, Vernon Louis. *Main Currents in American Thought. Vol. 3. The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920*. Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1930.
- Rauschenbusch, Winnifred. *Robert E. Park: Biography of a Sociologist*. Duke UP, 1979.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman's America: a Cultural Biography*. Vintage Books, 1995.
- Robertson, Michael. "Reading Poetry Religiously: The Walt Whitman Fellowship and Seeker Spirituality." *American Religious Liberalism*. Eds, Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein. Indiana UP, 2012.
- . *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples*. Princeton UP, 2008.
- Roche, John F. "Scattered Leaves: Morris's Men in America and the Polemical Magazine." *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4.1 (Fall, 1995): 93-104.
- Ross, Dorothy. *The Origins of American Social Science*. Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Ross, Edward A. "Social Control. XI." *American Journal of Sociology* 3.4 (Jan., 1898): 502-519.
- . "Social Control. XIII. The System of Social Control." *American Journal of Sociology* 3.6 (May, 1898): 809-828.
- Schmidgall, Gary, ed. *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame: Selections from Horace Traubel's the Conservator, 1890-1919*. University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- Small, Albion. "Small to William R. Harper, 25 April 1895," University of Chicago Special Collections, Presidential File, Sociology Department, University of Chicago.
- Stocking, George, Jr. *Race, Culture, and Evolution*. Free Press, 1968
- To-Morrow Magazine*. Oscar Triggs and Parker Sercombe, eds. Chicago, IL. 1905-1909.
- Triggs, Oscar Lovell. *Chapters in the History of the Arts and Crafts Movement*. The Bohemia Guild of the Industrial Art League, 1902.
- Tyrer, Patricia. "Oscar Lovell Triggs." *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. eds. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings. Garland, 1998.
- Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Justin Kaplan. Library of America, 1996.
- . *Song of Myself: With a Complete Commentary*. Eds., Ed Folsom and Christopher Merrill. University of Iowa Press, 2016.

Notes

¹ Of the scant critical attention, commentators tend to focus on the section's "animals" rather than the Whitman's "I." David Charles Leonard called it Whitman's attempt to reconnect "with his previous tokens of animality" (24). For Roy Bedichek it exemplified humans getting "spiritual nourishment from...animals" (172). Wendell Berry used it to examine "our relationship to [animals, and] our economic use of their and our world" (183). M. Jimmie Killingsworth suggested the lines "anticipated" the twentieth century "animal rights movement" (73). Closer to Park's are readings from Ed Folsom, who said that Whitman reveals humanity's lost "sense of...unity that animals...take for granted" (*Song of Myself* 106), and Martha Nussbaum, who contends the animals illustrate the "possibilities for self-respect, self-expression and social equality...obscured by...human life" (32).

² Per McGill, Whitman himself was immersed in a reprinting "culture" animated by the period's lax copyright laws and voracious reading publics (38). Joining McGill, the scholars behind the recently-launched Poetry Reprints are compiling a bibliography of all Whitman poems reprinted during his lifetime. The current results point to the various media that circulated his poems to far-flung places and for "political or religious concerns seemingly unharmonious" with *Leaves* (Omidasalar, et al 1).

³ In *Walt Whitman's America*, David S. Reynolds argues that Whitman's prejudice was "fueled by the so-called 'ethnological science'" including his "close relationship with Daniel Garrison Brinton...one of the most famous exponents of the racial-elimination theory" (471-73). George Hutchinson reaffirmed Whitman's interest in the "ethnological science," which "presented racist arguments" shared by his "admirer Daniel Brinton" (569).

⁴ Though Whitman never participated in the arts and crafts, his progressive followers, "determined to curb the influence of monopolies" and "robber barons," made Whitman the icon of artisan socialism (Garman 45).

⁵ Looking back, Park identified James' "Questions in Psychology" course as pivotal to his intellectual development.—especially an 1898 lecture later published as "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (Rauschenbusch 32). There James called for new Whitman-like philosophers who combined attentive observation, epistemological naivety, and empathetic understanding.