

A Song of the Material Self:  
A Posthumanist/Ecomaterial Reading of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

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Abstract:

Walt Whitman is most often remembered as the great bard of democracy. His poetic project was concerned with dismantling the boundaries that separated and plagued citizens of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. This radical strain of boundary-breaking has received considerable attention in the field of Whitman criticism. While adhering to the same general critical thematic of boundary-breaking, this paper will examine the ways in which Whitman reimagines not just the boundaries of the *body politic*, but also the corporeal integrity at the level of *material bodies*, and in doing so, begins to de-center the human subject and collapse boundaries between humans and the more-than-human-world. Whitman's intimate concern with nineteenth-century materialisms results in the portrayal of material bodies in "Song of Myself" as always-already embedded in an inherent material world. Furthermore, these corporeal bodies *themselves* become permeable. "Song of Myself" is not only concerned with questioning boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, but also between bodies and the more-than-human-world. Utilizing Stacy Alaimo's model of trans-corporeality, this paper contends that Whitman's tendency to break-bounds along with his often radical egalitarianism makes certain poems readable as a sort of "proto-posthumanism" in which the self is always-already a part of a vast network of interacting agencies not always restricted to the anthropological. This paper presents a reading of Whitman that is engaged with the environmental ethics concerns of the twenty-first century, and encourages seeing the more-than-human-world as something that is never "out there" or separate from humans as the term "Nature" has come to denote, but something that the speaker/poet is always intersubjectively implicated in.

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If anything, this paper contends that no man is an island. Nothing is ever really the accomplishment of a lone individual; the interactions and directions of others always inevitably shape any given production. This thesis is no exception. I would like to start by thanking the entire Honors and English Departments at DePaul University who have given me the opportunity to write this thesis in an incredibly supportive environment. I would like to thank my thesis advisors, Dr. James Fairhall and Dr. Randall Honold, whose guidance has been invaluable. Any redeeming qualities you may find in this paper are likely the result of their insights and suggestions. Any pitfalls are regrettably my own. I would also like to thank Dr. Marcy Dinius, whose work with and passion for nineteenth-century American literature has inspired my own work, and Dr. James Montgomery, whose Environmental Science class helped give shape to previously formless ideas that had been stewing in my head for years.

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Introduction:

“It is as if the beasts spoke.”

--Henry David Thoreau on Walt Whitman, in a letter to William Blake<sup>1</sup>

Inhale. Exhale. A seemingly benign activity if there ever was one. So much so in fact that breathing most often occurs outside the domain of consciousness, a reflex regulated by the medulla oblongata. Directing one's thoughts towards respiration, almost counter-intuitively, reveals its complexity. Humans breathe in oxygenated air produced by photosynthetic plants. The very same flora are currently being devastated by anthropological climate change and the ongoing Holocene extinction event. Thus the simple activity of breathing is engulfed in a grander network of interacting social, political, and material agencies. The existence of the human as a material being, by virtue of materiality, is tethered to these interactions.

Ecomaterialism, in the broadest sense, seeks to examine the physiological interconnectedness of the human and the more-than-human. As Serpil Opperman writes, Ecomaterialism...compels us to reckon a living world with the protean conditions of being mineral, vegetal, animal, and human; a material in which earthly beings,

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. M. Jimmie Killingsworth “‘As if the Beasts Spoke’: The Animal/Animist/Animated Walt Whitman” 19

things, and forces are environed with the same ecological, geological, and also biosocial plight.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this paper is to bring the theoretical framework of twenty-first century Ecomaterialism to the nineteenth-century poetry of Walt Whitman. Whitman is most often remembered as the great bard of democracy. His poetic project was concerned with dismantling the boundaries that separated and plagued citizens of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. This radical strain of boundary-breaking has received considerable attention in the field of Whitman criticism. While adhering to the same general critical thematic of boundary-breaking, this paper will examine the ways in which Whitman reimagines not just the boundaries of the *body politic*, but also the corporeal integrity at the level of *material bodies*, and in doing so, begins to de-center the human subject and collapse boundaries between humans and the more-than-human-world. Whitman's intimate concern with nineteenth-century materialisms results in the portrayal of material bodies, particularly in his poem, "Song of Myself" as always-already embedded in an inherent material world.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these corporeal bodies *themselves* become permeable. "Song of Myself" is not only concerned with questioning boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, but also between bodies and the more-than-

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<sup>2</sup> Serpil Opperman "Ecomaterialism" from the forthcoming *Posthuman Glossary*

<sup>3</sup> The term "always-already" is meant to suggest both the inherence of the material world and the inability of the human subject to perceive an immaterial state. The conscious human subject is always a material manifestation, and tethered by this materiality to a material world. Any pre-material state is always past; therefore a time in which the human was not embedded in a material world, for a human subject, is inconceivable. Thus, the human subject is "always-already" implicated in the consequences of embodied embeddedness in a material world.

human-world.<sup>4</sup> Utilizing ecomaterial theories such as Stacy Alaimo's model of trans-corporeality, this paper contends that Whitman's tendency to "break-bounds" along with his often-radical egalitarianism makes certain poems readable as a sort of "proto-posthumanism" in which the self is always-already a part of a vast network of interacting agencies not always restricted to the anthropological. Ultimately, this paper wishes to present a reading of Whitman that is engaged with the environmental ethics concerns of the twenty-first century, it encourages seeing the more-than-human-world as something that is never "out there" or separate from humans as the term "Nature" has come to denote, but something that the speaker/poet is always intersubjectively<sup>5</sup> implicated in.

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<sup>4</sup> "More-than-human-world" is a term coined by David Abram in book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Language and Perception in a More-Than-Human World*. It is meant to convey the idea that humanity is a subset within the larger context of existing material entities that are inherently encircling and permeating the human subject.

<sup>5</sup> "Intersubjectivity" is a concept from the work of philosopher Edmund Husserl. It works to address the philosophical problem of otherness by placing the source of objectivity in the possibility of the world as available not only to the self, but to the Other. It also works to address problematic conceptions of cognition as a private activity of the self, situating cognition as a relational phenomenon.

### Section One: Spirit of '55

A scholar would be hard pressed to find an adjective that has not been used to describe Walt Whitman in the seventy-two years of reviews published during his lifetime and the subsequent 124 years of intensive literary study dedicated to the “Great American Poet” that followed his death. If any one of these adjectives is indispensable it is “radical,” in that it is impossible to engage—even on a cursory level—with the body of work produced by Whitman without acknowledging the way in which it affected the fundamental complexion of poetry composed in the English language. As Betsy Erkkila attests, “The publication of *Leaves of Grass* on or about July 4, 1855, was an act of revolution, an assault on the institutions of Old-World culture that was as experimental and far-reaching in the artistic sphere as the American revolt against England had been in the political sphere” (*Political* 3). The publishing of the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* marks a radical departure from convention in both form and content. Utilizing free-form verse, parataxis, and colloquialisms, along with addressing the taboo subjects of sexuality as well as slavery and capitalism, *Leaves of Grass* asked important questions about what poetry *could* and *should* be on the new American continent.



More than simply broaching proscribed subject matter, Whitman was concerned with dismantling the boundaries that separated and plagued citizens of the United States. The mid-nineteenth century was a time of political and social turmoil. Corruption dominated urban politics, wealth was increasingly concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 brought hostility over the issue of slavery back to the forefront of public consciousness. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, as David S. Reynolds writes, suggests “that boundaries of section, class, and race that had become glaringly visible in America’s political arena could be imaginatively dissolved by affirmation of the cross-fertilization of its various cultural arenas” (*America* 309). Whitman believed strongly in the poet’s capacity to bring about this elimination of boundaries. As he wrote, “We need satisfiers, joiners, and lovers...These heated, torn, distracted ages are to be compacted and made whole” (NUPM; I, 96).<sup>6</sup> He also took on a personal, somewhat egotistical, responsibility to bring about this unification. As he told Horace Traubel, “I may perhaps be the only one living today who can throw an authentic sidelight upon the radicalism of the post-Revolutionary decades” (Traubel WWC I, 80).<sup>7</sup> This section will attempt to construct a concise synopsis of the established critical arguments for viewing the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the poem “Song of

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<sup>6</sup> Quote from Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, qtd. in Reynolds 309.

<sup>7</sup> Horace Traubel, born in 1858, was a resident of Camden, NJ during the time in which Whitman resided there. Traubel formed a friendship with Whitman when the poet was in his mid-seventies. Traditionally viewed by scholars as “the nineteenth-century equivalent of a tape recorder”—although his own influence on the framing of Whitman’s words is debated—Traubel kept extensive transcriptions of his conversations with Whitman, which now comprise seven large volumes of text. See Reynolds *Walt Whitman’s America* 556-8, Quote from Horace Traubel’s *Walt Whitman in Camden* qtd. in Erkkila *Whitman: The Political Poet* 22.

Myself” specifically as Whitman in his most radical mode, when he was most deeply concerned with dissolving boundaries.

In order to examine the proto-posthumanist strain in Whitman’s writing, this reading turns to the most radical 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. As Ivan Marki writes, “As *Leaves of Grass* grew through its five subsequent editions into a hefty book of 389 poems (with the addition of the two annexes), it gained much in variety and complexity, but Whitman's distinctive voice was never stronger, his vision never clearer, and his design never more improvisational than in the twelve poems of the first edition” (*WW Encyclopedia*). Present in this edition, which Emerson pointed to as a shining example of “free and brave thought,” (Emerson Letter, 1855) is the most explicit rethinking of the boundaries between humans and the more-than-human world. Much of this is attributable to the typography and publishing techniques used in the original printing. As Reynolds argues convincingly, “Everything about the book manifested Whitman’s interest in dissolving boundaries between different cultural levels” (*America* 313). The mid-nineteenth century saw a rise in demand for elaborately bound books in the United States. As Henry Ward Beecher commented in 1854 concerning the average bookstore customer, “He studies the binding: the leather, --Russia, English, calf, morocco; the lettering, the gilding, edging, the hinge of the cover!” (*Star Papers*, 1855)<sup>8</sup>. Whitman, undoubtedly aware of this trend, chose to bind the 1855 edition with an elegant deep-green jacket and engraved gold lettering for the title. Intricately embossed sprouting leaves and vines gives the text an organic feel. The embossing suggests a text that has grown spontaneously from the natural world while, simultaneously, the gilded quality

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<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Reynolds 312

provides an appeal to contemporary taste. Inside the cover of the book, the text itself attempts to invoke a different swath of the American cultural fabric. As Whitman said in 1856, he found democracy in the immense quantity of circulating “cheap mass-papers” (NUPM, VI: 2147)<sup>9</sup>. The simple typography, particularly as it is arranged in columns of the preface, is decidedly reminiscent of these early newspapers in constant circulation amongst mid-nineteenth-century America’s middle and lower classes. Collectively, the binding and typography of the original *Leaves of Grass* replicate familiar nineteenth-century reading material and work together as an attempt to cater to the United States *en masse*. In a material, textual entity, Whitman attempted to dissolve boundaries between elite and working classes, manifesting the diversity of American culture in the synergy of elite book tastes and common print typography.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere is this intention to reimagine and dismantle divisions between people and also the more-than-human world clearer than in the untitled first poem of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*—the poem that would eventually be called “Song of Myself.” As Marki comments:

In the 1855 edition, the power of "Song of Myself" is at its least controlled or self-consciously "poetic," and the versatility and wit of its language are at their freshest and most exhilarating. The "-ed" of the weak past tense is not yet replaced by the later editions' "'d"; four points of suspension are the only

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<sup>9</sup> Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* qtd. Reynolds in 313

<sup>10</sup> For this reading of the original publishing and typology of *Leaves of Grass* in relation to broader trends in nineteenth century American print culture, I am indebted to the thorough work of Whitman’s definitive biographer, David S. Reynolds. For a precise synopsis of mid-nineteenth century taste in book binding and publishing methods as they relate to the original *Leaves of Grass*, see Reynolds 310-314.

punctuation within a line; and beyond double spaces grouping lines into stanzas, no subdivisions of the sort that appear in later editions interrupt the onrush of words.

The parceling of the poem into fifty-two discrete sections in the later editions detracts from the formal innovativeness. Furthermore, the episodic structure in later editions disrupts the unceasing flow of stimuli present in the first edition, undermining the textual purpose of reimagining and dismantling boundaries. The diction is also less restrained in the 1855 edition. Whereas the speaker is “one of the roughs” in 1855, this is changed to “of Manhattan the son” in the later versions (Section 24 1855, 1881). Whitman’s incessant pruning in old age removed some of the more distinctive slang terms from the first edition—for example, the particularly colorful quote, “Washes and razors for foofoos”(1855).<sup>11</sup> The unmatched fluidity, use of colloquialisms, and defiance of poetic convention presents a poet immersed in the 1855 America about which he is writing. Thus, no other subsequent edition of “Song of Myself” more adequately situates the poet amidst a network of interacting phenomenon from the broadest possible cross-section of nineteenth-century American society.

In Whitman’s later poetry, the recontextualized view of the human as a node in a network of agencies, the desire to remove divisive boundaries, and the poet’s radical streak more generally are diminished for a variety of reasons. “Song of Myself” is unique in its attempt to cultivate a common ground between speaker, reader, and world. As James Miller writes, “the ‘I’ who speaks is not alone. His camerado, the ‘you’ addressed

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<sup>11</sup> For further consideration of the differences between the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, later editions, and the effects thereof, see Ivan Marki’s synopsis of the 1855 edition in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*



whole career”(WWC III: 95)<sup>12</sup>. To a certain extent, this quote must be viewed with skepticism. It is the reflection of a dying man who failed to acknowledge the fact that the majority of his most significant poems were composed before the Civil War began. Nonetheless, it indicates that the war was central to Whitman’s thought from the day it began to his own final days. Perhaps, as Bloom suggests, because of the Civil War and its chaotic aftermath, Whitman was never able to regain his original energy and radicalism.

Reynolds highlights the harsh criticism Whitman received from Ralph Waldo Emerson shortly after the publication of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Despite his initial letter of congratulations to Whitman—calling *Leaves of Grass* America’s “most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom”—he quickly inverted his opinion of the text. In a letter along with a copy of the book sent to Thomas Carlyle in 1856, Emerson called the book “a nondescript monster” and told Carlyle “you can light your pipe with it” (*Correspondence* 509)<sup>13</sup>. Partially influenced by negative reviews from his peers, Emerson began to object to the sexual passages in *Leaves of Grass*, and ultimately decided against including any of the text he once praised so highly in the anthology of his favorite poetry, *Parnassus* (*America* 343). Although Whitman would later deny the influence of Emerson on his poetry, his decision to immediately send Emerson a copy of the original *Leaves of Grass*, as well as his use of Emerson’s initially venerating letter to promote subsequent editions, suggests that Whitman craved the respect of America’s leading intellectual. Certainly, harsh criticism from Emerson could have shaken the

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<sup>12</sup> Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* qtd. in Reynolds 413

<sup>13</sup> qtd. Reynolds 343

unbridled confidence Whitman expressed in the 1855 edition, pushing the poet to withdraw from his radical boundary-defying agenda in later versions.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth takes a slightly different tack in explaining the poet's post war decline. While he acknowledges, like both Reynolds and Bloom, the pervasive effect of the Civil War, he also brings in the material dimension, pointing to the poet's failing body as a potential cause of his decline. Whitman suffered his first stroke in 1873, which left him partially paralyzed, and because of decreased mobility, removed from the fleshy connection of touch between bodies and the more-than-human world so prevalent in his early work. As Killingsworth writes:

The poems were also affected by Whitman's own physical life. Mediating between world and text, the poet's body felt the accelerated decline of illness and grief associated with the war and its after-effects, helping to account in part for the increasing abstraction and distance in the postwar poetry's treatment of natural scenes and phenomena (*Earth* 10).

Instead depicting the poet so immersed in the more-than-human world, and deeply concerned with the radical rethinking of boundaries, Whitman's later poetry presents a natural world in starkly conventional fashion, as something that is "out there" rather than all-inclusive. His treatment of nature almost entirely in the abstract fortifies boundaries rather than collapsing them. Certainly, this can be at least partially attributed to his debilitating stroke that left him unable to travel as he once did.

Regardless of the definitive—and barring new evidence, ultimately indeterminable—cause of Whitman's decline, it is apparent that the 1855 "Song of Myself" represents the apex of the poet's mission to dissolve boundaries. Much work in

the field of Whitman studies has been dedicated to demonstrating the poet's desire to dismantle and transcend the divisions of race, class, and gender that he saw as fundamentally detrimental to the establishment of democracy. Moving forward, this paper will attempt to examine the ways in which this general trend of breaking boundaries works at the level of material bodies, and in doing so, will raise questions of corporeal integrity and environmental ethics related to contemporary fields of posthumanist and new materialist theory.

## Section Two: Whitman and Nineteenth Century Materialisms

At its most fundamental level, Whitman's poetic project was to break down boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Much critical work has been done concerned with representing Whitman as most intimately concerned with "the boundaries of traditional sexual, social, and cultural taboos" (*Bounds* 6). While adhering to the same general critical thematic of boundary-breaking, this section will examine the ways in which Whitman reimagines not just the boundaries of the *body politic*, but also the corporeal integrity at the level of *material bodies*, and in doing so, begins to de-center the human subject and collapse boundaries between humans and the more-than-human-world.

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<sup>14</sup> This is such a prevalent trend in Whitman studies that Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman have published a collection of Whitman criticism titled *Breaking Bounds* which draws its title and essays from a Whitman conference held at the University of Pennsylvania in 1992, "Breaking Bounds: A Whitman Centennial Celebration" (5).



The 1855 edition of “Song of Myself” is Whitman at his most radical. Informed by contemporaneous work in the critical fields of post-humanism and new materialism, “Song of Myself” can be viewed as both a literal and figurative palimpsest. In a literal sense, Whitman revised the poem extensively over his nearly forty-year career as a poet, from its original publication in 1855 to the “Deathbed edition” in 1891. While much of the original remains beneath surface changes in the later editions, I contend that the alterations were, if anything, detrimental to a post-humanist/new materialist reading. In a figurative sense, reading “Song of Myself” in the light of post-humanist and new materialist responses to our contemporary environmental crisis also renders the text as a palimpsest. Rapidly accelerating environmental degradation on a global scale has given environmental issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a sense of exigency and primacy. This reading wishes to transfer that sense of urgency from 2016 onto the text of “Song of Myself,” and in doing so, use the text to contribute to a desperately needed reconsideration of the relationship between human bodies and the more-than-human-world in currently being undertaken by contemporary ecocriticism and its various sub-strata.

Although admittedly palimpsestic, this reading is not entirely an anachronistic imposition, as there is evidence to suggest that considering the boundaries of human corporeality was something firmly implanted in Whitman’s mind. As Linda Nash contends in *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* the predominant nineteenth century paradigm for viewing the body differed sharply from our contemporary view. Bodies in the nineteenth century were characterized by their “permeability” in that they were embedded in “a constant exchange between inside and outside, by fluxes and flows, and by its close dependence on the surrounding

environment” (*Inescapable* 12). Nash calls this conception—admittedly anachronistic neologism—the “ecological body” and uses the example of California’s early settlers who saw their physical health as a direct result of the “health” of the land upon which they settled as well as their subsequent interventions with the more-than-human-world. By contrast, these connections are not present in the “modern body” formulation. An amalgamation of Western allopathic medicine and consumer capitalism, the “modern body” is “the body that is defined in medical textbooks, the body that is composed of discrete parts and bounded by its skin; in other words, the idea of the body that most of us take as so self evident that it requires no comment” (*Inescapable* 12). While the mid-twentieth century has brought about a resurgence of consciousness concerning the embedded relationship between human bodies and the more-than-human-world—due in large part to texts like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*—our contemporary view of the human body is significantly more isolated, quantifiable, and discrete than in the time in which Whitman was writing.<sup>15</sup>

Evidence of Whitman’s concern with rethinking the boundaries of material bodies can be found in his fascination with a nineteenth-century resurgence of Epicurean philosophy as well as contemporaneous (pseudo)-scientific movements. Whitman was an adherent of phrenology, choosing to publish his own, flattering, phrenological report on four different occasions. Although this field has since been dismissed as pseudoscience, and is also a precursor to fields of medicine which have continually aimed to parcel the body into discrete and quantifiable sections, Whitman’s interest suggests that he was

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<sup>15</sup> A synopsis of Nash and a through version of this comparative analysis between nineteenth and twentieth-twenty-first century conceptions of the human body can be found in Alaimo (90-91)

concerned with the material manifestation of phenomena previously categorized under the jurisdiction of an immaterial soul. More significant for this reading is his interest in the Epicurean writings of Fanny Wright and the work of organic chemistry pioneer Justus Von Liebig, whose theories he saw as scientific justification for the interconnected materialism proposed by Epicurus. This section aims to highlight contemporary philosophical and scientific movements as they influenced Whitman, as well as direct the reading of bodies in Whitman as immersed in a world of intersubjectivity.

Whitman became interested in phrenology after hearing Orson Fowler lecture in 1846, and he went on to review several phrenological books favorably in the newspaper, the *Brooklyn Eagle* (*America* 247). He had his own head examined on July 16, 1849 by Lorenzo Fowler and was undoubtedly pleased with the results. On a scale of one to seven, with seven corresponding to the brain's largest possible capacity, Whitman received a score of six to seven in Self Esteem and Caution, a six in Amativeness, Adhesiveness, Philoprogenitiveness, Concentrativeness, and Combativeness, and a five in Language<sup>16</sup> (Kaplan 152). While phrenology's detractors saw it as materialistic fatalism, Fowlers—and through Fowlers, Whitman—believed the opposite. Their idea of phrenology was a holistic one, in which physical and mental life were inseparable, and that systematic “exercise” of a particular trait could lead to the development of the

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<sup>16</sup> Phrenology divided the brain into thirty-seven organs of mental and moral faculties. The areas Whitman scored the highest in were “Amativeness” or physical love, “Adhesiveness” or love between friends (also used by Whitman as a euphemism for homosexuality in his poetry), “Philoprogenitiveness” or love for one's offspring, “Concentrativeness” or intellectual propensity most generally, “Combativeness” or the disposition to argue and fight, and “Language” or philological capacity. For more on the history of phrenology see Renato M.E. Sabbatini, “Phrenology, the History of Brain Localization” 1997. For more on phrenology's impact on nineteenth-century social thought and secular education, see Stephen Tomlinson *Head Masters*.

corresponding section of the brain (*America* 248). In that regard, Whitman's conception of mind and body was one of indivisibility, in which mental states were always already embedded in corresponding material structures. This sentiment turns up at various instances throughout "Song of Myself" such as when Whitman writes, "My head evolves on my neck" (1855 34). This line suggests that the "head" or brain is capable of evolving, progressing forward towards a superior form. Furthermore, it is critical that the head remains tethered to the neck, suggesting the inseparability of mental states from corporeality and a materialism characteristic of phrenology. In another section Whitman writes, "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul" (1855 41). This equation of body and soul can be read as a materialist rejection of dualism, and by implication through the lens of phrenology, a suggestion that mental faculties—typically ascribed to an immaterial soul in traditional Christian dualist theology—are embedded in corporeality.<sup>17</sup>

Much of Whitman's materialist strain can be attributed to his reading of Frances (Fanny) Wright in his youth.<sup>18</sup> An obscure text aside from its historical connection to the poet, Whitman called Wright's *Ten Days in Athens*, "daily food to me: I kept it about me for years" (WWC, II: 445).<sup>19</sup> Wright's text is set in ancient Greece, and is largely a

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<sup>17</sup> Whitman's equation of body and soul are most explicit in the second poem of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, "I Sing the Body Electric" where he writes, "O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I say now these are the soul!" and "And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?" (1855 65-70).

<sup>18</sup> While the connection between Whitman's materialist ideas and Fanny Wright's Epicurean text is the work of David S. Reynolds, Wright's social reform campaigns also influenced Whitman's writing. For more on the connection between Wright's early abolitionist and feminist activism and the writing of Whitman see Kaplan (57, 63).

<sup>19</sup> Qtd Erkkila *Whitman: The Political Poet* 27

dialogue between Epicurus and his followers. Present in Wright's text is a radical deism that is almost entirely materialistic. She contends that, "although we have no physical evidence of God or an afterlife, we can still be confident that all matter is immortal, since material things, when they dissolve, become transformed into other things through an exchange of atoms" (*America* 42). This Epicurean materialism and interchangeability of atoms is a hallmark of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and is made apparent in one of the poem's most often cited quotations, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1855 1). Whitman found solace in the claim Wright made through Epicurus that all the material manifestations of human and more than human world were "only the different disposition of these eternal and unchanging atoms" (*America* 42). These early materialist/Epicurean readings set the stage for an older Whitman who would rethink the boundaries of human corporeality in his own writing.

In many ways, Whitman saw the work of organic chemistry pioneer Justus von Liebig as the scientific justification for the Epicurean beliefs imprinted upon the poet in his youth. When von Liebig's *Chemistry in Its Application to Physiology and Agriculture* appeared in the U.S. in 1847, Whitman reviewed it favorably in the *Eagle*, writing, "The elevating, beautiful, study...Chemistry—which involves the essences of creation, and the changes, and the growths, and formations and decays of so large a constituent part of the earth, and the things thereof!" (*America* 240). A pioneer in the field of organic chemistry, von Liebig articulated the exchange of chemical compounds between plants and animals. He discovered that during the process of decomposition, the chemical compounds of one entity are reassigned "to another arrangement of the atoms of a body, that is, to the production of a compound which did not before exist in it" (Liebig 227).

Whitman found in this work—much like he found in the ideas of Epicurean philosophy—a consoling description of eternal life in the absence of an external deity. Images of von Liebig’s work appear throughout “Song of Myself,” perhaps most famously in the line, “The smallest sprout shows there really is no death” (1855 5). By engaging the von Liebig in his poetry, Whitman situates the human as being fundamentally a part of the material world and invites questions concerning the portrayal of bodies as discrete entities.

These first two sections have attempted to argue for the place of the 1855 “Song of Myself” as Whitman in his most radical boundary-breaking mode, and also to situate the text amidst the context of nineteenth century materialisms. Moving forward, I will introduce twentieth and twenty-first century post humanist and new materialist theories to the reading of Whitman. These theoretical models will shed light on Whitman’s situating of human bodies as embedded in the more-than-human world, always-already a part of its web of intersubjectivity.

### Section Three: The Embedded Self

Having established Whitman's intimate concern with nineteenth-century materialisms, this section will examine the ways in which the material body of "Song of Myself" is always-already embedded in an inherent material world. In the 1855 "Song of Myself" primacy is given to sensory perception. Written as a first person speaking "I" who is constantly in sensuous contact with the world, Whitman's poem resonates with the perception-based phenomenology of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in particular his later work, *The Visible and the Invisible*. While phenomenology's most fundamental aim is to describe phenomenon as experienced by a first person consciousness, Merleau-Ponty was the first to identify the corporeal body as the site of perceptual consciousness. In the word of David Abram,

Transcendence, no longer a special property of the abstract intellect, becomes in his (Merleau-Ponty's) *Phenomenology* a capacity of the physiological body

itself—its power of responding to other bodies, of touching, hearing, and seeing things, resonating with things. Perception is this ongoing transcendence, the ecstatic nature of the living body (*Voice of the Earth* 103)<sup>20</sup>

The primacy of the sensuous situates the human experience of self as always-already embedded in the corporeal world. Our bodies filter and furnish our intellectual capacities, which according to Merleau-Ponty shift the locus of subjectivity from an abstracted, transcendent capacity of the intellect, to what he calls the “body-subject.” This phenomenology confounds any approach based on a disembodied, objective epistemology, and makes any ontology incomplete without accounting for the body-subject’s embeddedness in the corporeal world.

This phenomenology is evident in Whitman’s structuring of the self in “Song of Myself” as composed of its sensuous interactions with the world. Whitman’s tendency to break boundaries between entities creates a self that is integrated with other bodies and the more-than-human-world. In the words of critic Wojciech Majka, “the Whitmanesque as well as the phenomenological approach work with the idea that the self is not (only) a metaphysical existent but a way of being-in-the-world” (*Idioms* 33). Whitman also “merges” the soul and the body, dismantling formal boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, and engaging the soul in Pontian fashion as a reflection of the body-subject’s being-in-the-world.

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<sup>20</sup> Much of this reading of Merleau-Ponty’s work comes from David Abram’s *Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth*. Abram focuses on the embedded relationship Merleau-Ponty’s work develops between humans and the more-than-human-world through the Pontian concept of the “Flesh” which is always both the “my flesh” and the “Flesh of the world.” Stacy Alaimo’s work *Bodily Natures* mentioned below also relies heavily on Abram’s reading of Merleau-Ponty.



The speaking self, the “I” of “Song of Myself,” is almost constantly corporeally present—relaying a sensuous, embodied experience of the world to the reader. In one of many like passages, the speaker laborers alongside working-class men,

The big doors of the country-barn stand open and ready  
 The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon,  
 The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,  
 The armfuls are packed to the sagging mow:  
 I am there....I help....I came stretched atop of the load,  
 I felt its soft jolts....one leg reclined on the other,  
 I jump from the crossbeams, and seize the clover and timothy,  
 And roll head over heels, and tangle my hair full of wisps (1855 6)

The corporeal body of the speaker is “there” in this harvest scene, indicating its presence through the *feeling* of the wagons “soft jolts.”<sup>21</sup> It is thus implied that an embodied self is *seeing* the “clear light” which from the self’s perspective muddles the “brown gray and green intertinged” grasses into composite “armfuls”—a metric derived from the presence of laboring bodies. This corporeal presence differs sharply from the speakers of earlier

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<sup>21</sup> It is important at this juncture to highlight the difference between “Walt” and “Walter” Whitman. Since the mid-twentieth century and the formal articulation of intentional fallacy, it has been implicit in literary criticism that one cannot equate the speaker of a literary work with the author in an attempt to derive textual meaning from biographical knowledge. However, “Song of Myself” presents a unique case in that the speaker of the poem mid-way through proclaims that he is “Walt Whitman, one of the roughs, a kosmos” (1855 17). However, “Walt” and “Walter” can only be related, not equated. The original *Leaves of Grass* was published with no printed author. The only indication of a creator is a listed “Walter Whitman” in the publisher’s note. Thus, the “Walt Whitman” who appears mid-text seems to spring from nowhere, drawing attention to the way in which this “self” of the poem is constructed.

Romantic poetry, such as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," who observes the countryside "secluded" and in the shade of a "dark sycamore" (*Collected Wordsworth* 66). While the Wordsworthian poetic directive demands "powerful feelings...recollected in tranquility," the Whitmanesque situates the speaker-poet as "stretched atop the load," *feeling* and *being* in the world (*Lyrical Ballads* Preface).

Another passage in "Song of Myself" contains one of Whitman's hallmark lists. As the speaker walks through a semi-urban area—a synecdoche of America evidenced by the date, by no coincidence the Fourth of July—he records his sensory interaction with various townspeople going about their daily business. He hears a "pure contralto" singing, sees a "lady" sitting for her "daguerreotype," witnesses a tinner "tinning the roof," and "masons...calling for mortar" amongst many other actions on the massive list which spans nearly three full pages of text. The list concludes with two lines, somewhat reminiscent of the Shakespearean sonnet's concluding couplet in their capacity to catalyze the previous lines of verse, as the speaker says, "And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am" (1855 11). The speaker of the poem recognizes his bodily embeddedness—the way in which the self is comprised of its sensual relationship to others. By perceiving the swirling mass of bodies tending "inward to me" the speaker reveals its being-in-the-world as a process of tending "outward to them." The ultimate conclusion is a disclosure of the self as a body-subject, comprised of a body mediating its perceptive relationship to other bodies, and a restructuring of the boundaries between the self and the inherent more-than-self. As the poet claims, "of these more or less I am."

The primacy of the sensual and the corporeal embeddedness of the human experience of self continue in another, more intimate passage of “Song of Myself.”

Whitman writes,

This is the press of a bashful hand....this is the float and odor of hair,

This is the touch of my lips to yours....this is the murmur of yearning,

This is the far-off depth and height reflecting my own face,

This is the thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet again. (1855 13)

Again the body of the speaker is at the forefront, engaging physically with another. The speaker smells “the odor of hair,” and feels “the press of a bashful hand” as well as “the touch of my lips to yours.” In concluding this sensual passage with the “merge of myself and the outlet” which reflects his own face, the poet again locates the subjectivity of the self in a perceptive interaction with an inherent other. Rather than the speaker-subject acting on an other-object, the structuring of the self is decidedly intersubjective.

Furthermore, this passage engages with what Abram calls the “paradigm phenomenon” of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, depth. As Abram writes,

To the student of perception, the phenomenon of depth is the original ambiguity: it is depth that provides the slack or play in the immediately perceived world, the instability that already calls upon the freedom of the body to engage, to chose, to *focus* the world long before any verbal reflection comes to thematize and appropriate that freedom as its own (*Voice of the Earth* 103, emphasis in original).

By engaging the spatial consideration of depth on perception, Whitman anticipates a fundamental concern of Pontian phenomenology. Visual depth adds a dimension by which the perceiving body constitutes its relationship to the world, the reversal of how a

rejection of physiological senses engenders a metaphysical distancing from the perceived world. As Abram contends, “renewed attentiveness to bodily senses,” prompts a recognition of “our corporeal immersion in the depths of a body much larger than our own” (*Voice of the Earth* 105).

Transcendence as a result of the physiological body’s perceptive capacities becomes most explicit in “Song of Myself” in a scene when the speaker witnesses a choral performance. Whitman writes,

I hear the trained soprano....she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip;  
 The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,  
 It wrenches ardors from my breast,  
 It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror,  
 It sails me....I dab with bare feet....they are licked by the indolent waves,  
 I am exposed....cut by bitter and poisoned hail,  
 Steeped amid honeyed morphine....my windpipe squeezed in the fakes of death,  
 Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,  
 And that we call Being. (1855 20).

In this erotically charged passage, the speaker is nearly overwhelmed by a flood of the sensual. The corporeal body is always present as the explicit medium of perception. The poet alternately “convulses,” “whirls,” and “throbs” with the music, the stream of verbs suggesting a physical resonance of body and singer. Emotion is wrenched “from my breast.” In a bout of synesthesia, the poet’s naked foot is “licked” by sonic waves. This conflation of the senses draws attention to the fact that even aural perceiving is a physical process of a physiological body. The final four lines contain a bit of the Romantic

sublime, contrasting images of horror and pleasure—“bitter poisoned hail” and “honeyed morphine”—resulting in an ultimately epiphanic revelation. In the context of this sensory bounty, the speaker arrives at, or “feel(s)” the “puzzle of puzzles,” which following the most general thematic of this poem titled “Song of Myself” is the often puzzling existence of the self as a body-subject, or “what we call Being.” By resolving this sensual episode in a metaphysical recognition of “Being,” the speaker suggests transcendence as an ongoing capacity of the perceiving body. The locus of subjectivity is shifted from the abstracted intellect to the physical form, whose convulsions, whirls, and throbs comprise the self’s transcendent disclosure, self-revealing as it is inherent corporeal world—a demonstration of the physiological body-subject as it is being-in-the-world.

The physiological genesis of the human experience of subjectivity can also be seen in Whitman’s conception of the “soul.” The Whitmanesque soul is an amalgamation of the self’s subjectivity, analogous to the thoughts and reflections that comprise the “Invisible” in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Like Merleau-Ponty this invisible component is also inseparable from the corporeal in Whitman’s poetry. In perhaps the most famous passage of “Song of Myself” the speaker “loafes” with an externalized soul in an open field,

I believe in you my soul....the other I am must not abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass....loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want....not custom or lecture, not even the best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;  
 You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me.  
 And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript  
 heart,  
 And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet. (1855 3)

This passage describes Whitman's most important departure from Emersonian philosophy. While according to Emersonian Transcendentalism the soul always seeks communion with the immaterial "Oversoul," the soul of Whitman begins as an externalized entity, and imbues the material body of the speaker with subjectivity until at the conclusion of the passage the two become inseparable. By designating the soul and the body as components, which must not "abase" one to the other, the speaker depicts the entities as codependent, until the soul entirely—and sexually—permeates the body, from "beard" to "feet," forming a singular material entity. This early passage of the poem renders the soul material, tethered to the body's embedded being-in-the-world, and setting the stage for the speaker's later notions of "Being" as the transcendent capacity of the physiological, perceptive body. This can be seen most concisely in the poet's elevation of the senses to the realm of the miraculous, "I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each tag of me is a miracle" (1855 17)<sup>22</sup>. By equating the sensual and the miraculous, the poet suggests that

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<sup>22</sup> A possible source for Whitman's equation is Thomas Carlyle's conception of "Natural Supernaturalism" from his novel *Sartor Resartus*. Published in 1836, the close friendship of Emerson and Carlyle suggests that Whitman may have been interested in Carlyle's work.

transcendence is a property of the physiological body. The visible and the invisible are rendered inseparable; the metaphysical is contingent upon the physical. The “soul” and its subjectivity are not derived from a deity or the orientation to an Emersonian “Oversoul,” but from the material body’s being-in-the-world.

The primacy of physiological perception in the formation of subjectivity, attested by Merleau-Ponty and suggested in the poetry of Whitman, renders the human self as a body-subject embedded in materiality. This makes any ontology that fails to account for the body’s material embeddedness in the more-than-human-world decidedly incomplete. The following sections will attempt to utilize post-humanist and new materialist theories to analyze the ways in which Whitman handles the embeddedness of humans in the more-than-human-world and present a reading that promotes an environmentally ethical consciousness for the twenty-first century.

#### Section Four: The Permeable Self

While the previous section established the bodies of Whitman’s “Song of Myself” as embedded in a more-than-human-world, the following section wishes to address the ways in which the corporeal bodies *themselves* become permeable. “Song of Myself” is not only concerned with questioning boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical, but also between bodies and the more-than-human-world. Building on the work of Merleau-Ponty—David Abram’s reading in *The Spell of the Sensuous* in particular—Ecofeminist critic Stacy Alaimo has formulated a model of “trans-corporeality” that fashions a coevolutionary landscape for material human bodies and the more-than-human material world. Trans-corporeality demonstrates “the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures.” Furthermore,

Alaimo suggests, “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (*Natures* 2). Reading “Song of Myself” in this mode reveals web of material and biochemical processes that human bodies shape and are in turn shaped by.

These trans-corporeal webs also raise questions about agency, undermining the traditional subject-object relationship of scientific rationalism. The great democratic urge of Whitman’s writing extends to the more-than-human-world. Seemingly insignificant material entities are recognized as integral components of an intersubjective environment. Critic Jane Bennet also articulates the presence of what she terms “Impersonal Sympathy” in the poetry of Whitman. In highlighting the seemingly “banal” fact that bodies always have an orientation, Bennet attempts to uncover a network of material agencies. By drawing on organic phenomenon such as heliophilic plants, Bennet presents a conceptualization of Sympathy in Whitman’s poetry apart from the conscious activities of the psyche. These “circuits of energy or physical propensity” demonstrate the “tangled threads connecting us to other bodies” while also demonstrating the ways in which “Nature enacts itself and us in ways that are indifferent to human well-being” (*Material* 240, emphasis in original).

Collectively these circuits of sympathy serve to prompt a reconsideration of corporeal boundaries, notably in the 1855 “Song of Myself.” I suggest that in that text human flesh is depicted as a permeable entity always already implicated in the more-than-human world. This eliminates any sharp division between bodies and a supposedly external “Nature.” As Linda Nash claims, when asking, “Where does the body end and ‘nonhuman



nature' begin?" one must always consider that environments are always shaping "human flesh in minute and profound ways" (*Natures* 11). As Edward S. Casey writes, "my body and natural things are not just coterminous but continuous with each other" (*Natures* 11). Whitman engages with this conceptualization of the human body as permeable through his more general poetic project of the democratic breaking of boundaries. This reading of Whitman encourages seeing the more-than-human-world as something that is never "out there" or separate from humans as the term "Nature" has come to denote, but is that which the speaker/poet is always intersubjectively implicated. In terms of environmental ethics and politics, as Timothy Morton notes, "Our continued survival, and therefore the survival of the planet we're now dominating beyond all doubt, depends on our thinking past Nature" (*Thought* 5).

From the perspective of 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental crisis, where Whitman falls short in his depiction of the more-than-human-world is in his belief in the environment's unlimited capacity to restore balance, which could encourage environmental exploitation if unchecked. As Whitman was firmly grounded in a deistic worldview paradigm, and writing prior to widespread prevalent environmental degradation this critique is certainly anachronistic. However, it does present an important caveat to reading "Song of Myself" as an environmentally ethical text.

"Song of Myself" begins with a triumphant proclamation of self,

I celebrate myself,

And what I shall assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (1855 1)

In what Camille Paglia calls a “mystical shotgun wedding” the speaker merges with audience on material terms through the Epicurean belief of atomic exchange (*Burn* 89). It is important to note that the concluding statement of this stanza is one of condescension rather than appropriation. The poet does not absorb the atoms of the audience, but concedes his own, framing the material relationship between self and other as intersubjective.

Later in the poem’s first section, Whitman writes,

The smoke of my own breath

Echos, ripples, and buzzed whispers....loveroot, silkthread, crotch and vine,

My respiration and inspiration....the beating of my heart....the passing of blood  
and air through my lungs,

The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and darkcolored sea-  
rocks, and of hay in the barn,

The sound of my voice....words loosed to the eddies of  
the wind, (*1855* 1).

In this passage sensual imagery alternates between the biological processes of the human body and the components of the more than human world. This structuring implies a comparison between the two, relating “loveroot, silkthread” and “the passing of blood and air through my lungs.” The poet inhales the air through respiration, and is imbued with tactile and olfactory relations to the surrounding environment, the “sniff of green leaves” as well as the “Echos, ripples and buzzed whispers.” He later effuses an aural stimulus, “The sound of my voice....words loosed to the eddies of / the wind.” This passage, from the poems onset, structures the embedded body of the poet as trans-

corporeal, or a permeable site that is constantly imbibing from and emitting sensory qualia in to the more-than-human-world. In Pagila's words, "nature floods into him" and speaker makes himself "a conduit for nature's 'original energy'" (*Burn* 89). The poet's "respiration" is his "inspiration" as the interchange between body and the material world permeate the poet's corporeal form and produce verbal response. Unlike Classical appeals to a divine muse, Whitman's speaker derives inspiration from its embedded, sensual contact with the environment.

In a collection of poems titled *Leaves of Grass*, special attention must be paid to passages that deal with grass explicitly. Grass appears through out "Song of Myself" and in many ways serves as Whitman's chief synecdoche for the more-than-human. In an early passage of the poem, the speaker is asked by a child, "What is the grass?" Unable to answer definitively, the speaker provides a litany of possibilities,

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
 And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
 Growing among black folks as among white,  
 Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the  
 same. (1855 4)

The grass in this passage is explicitly ideogrammatic—a "uniform hieroglyphic." A symbol of Whitman's democratic push, the grass is impartial to the social stratifications of humanity, growing amongst the dominant and the marginalized, the "Tuckahoe" and the "Congressman."

The next stanza depicts the grass as it is involved in the biochemical process of decomposition.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly I will use you curling grass,

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,

It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;

It may be you are from and from women, and from offspring taken soon

Out of their mothers' laps,

And here you are the mothers' laps. (1855 4)

Still fostering a democratic image, the grass grows on the graves of men and woman, young and old alike. The image of grass transpiring from the breasts of young men is in the most literal sense, an image of a decomposing body's nutrients being recycled as fuel for plant life. The grass is therefore agential, consuming the nutrients of a passive body for its own uses, growing in an egalitarian fashion in spite of human social categories, and reversing the subject-object power relationship of traditional Rationalist human interaction with the more-than-human-world. The "kosmic" significance of this passage, to use a Whitmanesque term, is the illustration of the way in which the human life cycle intermeshed within a greater more-than-human context. The poet "uses" the grass to demonstrate the way in which any human life cycle is inseparable from life *cycles*. The deceased "offspring" are taken from their mother's laps in the process becoming part of the grass. The grass itself is described as "the mothers' lap" in the final line of the stanza, suggesting the children have simply transitioned from one nurturing maternal image to another—the former relegated to an individual human life cycle, the latter more-than-human life cycles more generally. The representation of grass emerging from the chest of

a man muddles any conception of corporeality existing in isolation, and instead suggests trans-corporeality, in which a body's relationship to the more-than-human-world is always characterized by interchange.

The decomposing body is a reoccurring image throughout "Song of Myself," serving as a depiction of trans-corporeal inseparability from the "environment." Towards the end of the poem Whitman writes,

And as to you corpse, I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me,  
I smell the white roses sweetscented and growing,  
I reach to the leafy lips...I reach to the polished breasts of melons.

And as to you life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,

No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before. (1855 42)

As above in the case of the grass covering the graves, the corpse has become a source of nutrients from growing plant life. This depiction of the body as "manure" profoundly decentralizes the human, broadening the context of corporeality to include the ways in which material bodies participate in an organic interchange of chemicals posthumously. Traditional human-subject nature-object is again turned on its head, as the fauna's life-producing uptake of the decomposing body's nutrients reflects an agency external to the human psyche. The erotic, anatomical personifications of "leafy lips" and "breasts of melons" questions corporeal integrity, as in a trans-corporeal fashion the more-than-human-world has subsumed components of the human body. The concluding couplet returns to the earlier concept of cyclical interchange. The plant "life" is the product of "many deaths," producing a conceptualization of material immortality apart from the

transition of consciousness through the body's interconnections with the environment as the speaker states, "No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before." This sentiment is most concisely expressed in one of the poem's most famous lines, "The smallest sprout shows there really is no death" (1855 5).

"Song of Myself" does not only focus on the body's concession of sustenance to the environment, but also recognizes the body's inseparability through its extraction of nourishment from the more-than-human-world. The speaker states, "Who goes there! hankering, gross, mystical, nude? / How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?" (1855 13). Stripped naked, the speaker recognizes the production of a material self is inseparable from its consumption of more-than-human bodies. At its most fundamental, evidenced by the "nude" imagery, the speaker recognizes that his own life, like the life of the plants, is a result of the interchange of "strength" between trans-corporeal forms.

The argument can be made that decomposition is the most general governing thematic of "Song of Myself" in its entirety. Aside from scattered examples, the poem is framed by the triumphant "birth" of the speaker at the poem's beginning, and the subsequent death and decomposition of the speaker in the conclusion. At the poem's end the speaker says,

I depart as air...I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles. (1855 44)

Just as the plants and bodies elsewhere in the poem, the speaker himself participates in biological interchange. The speaker's flesh is effused, merging with the dirt and grass in an ultimately decentering, trans-corporeal fusion with the more-than-human world. Whitman's great project of breaking bounds is ultimately apparent at the level of the physiological body. The democratic urge—the push for an egalitarian worldview—resonates in his construction of human bodies as always already intermeshed in the more-than-human world.

Returning to Jane Bennett's conceptualization of "Impersonal Sympathy" and the poetry of Whitman, in her reading, the physical propensities of bodies as they orientate themselves to other bodies reveals a network of material agencies. In one passage of "Song of Myself" in particular, the Whitman writes,

The sharphoofed moose of the north, the cat on the housesill, the chickadee, the  
prairie-dog.

The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,  
The brood of the turkeyhen, and she with her halfspread wings,  
I see in them and myself the same old law.

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,  
They scorn the best I can do to relate to them. (1855 9)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Although Bennett uses the 1891-92 "Deathbed" edition of *Leaves of Grass* for her quotations from "Song of Myself," the passages she refers to are also present in the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself."

As Bennett claims that what Whitman describes as the “old law” is Sympathy, or the “default infrastructure of relations-between-bodies” (*Material* 244). For Whitman, these currents of affection are omnipresent between all bodies—between the maternal positioning of the sow and the turkeyhen, the erotic sensation of a foot pressed to the earth. Perhaps most importantly, they are not the result of a conceptualized relation to them—“it is unwilled, and its mechanism is not fully intelligible” (*Material* 244). On the other hand, these forces are not “indeterminable of inimical to sense.” On the contrary, they are readily observable upon reflection. “Song of Myself” calls upon the reader to “imitate the countenances of natural objects” in order to engender effects upon the psyche. Bennett points to one passage from “Song of Myself” in particular, “Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” (1855 3). For Bennett, this contemplative stance—demonstrated visually in the daguerreotype of the author featured in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*—reflects Whitman’s desire to “be still enough to take in other bodies but not so passive as to fail to ‘broadcast’ one’s participation in the scene” (*Material* 247). These physiological orientations are ultimately categorized under the term “impersonal sympathy,” which

names a material agency, a power of bodies human and non-human, a mode of impersonal connection, attachment, and care that proceeds from below subjectivity into subjectivity (*Material* 250).

From this perspective, the *stance* of a corporeal body could be viewed as a trans-corporeal phenomenon in that the production of subjectivity can be a result of the interplay between physiological orientation and the more-than-human-world. The



“sidecurved head” of Whitman prompts the contemplation of a gestalt “in and out of the game” and a consciousness structured by its inseparability from the material environment.

Reading Whitman in the twenty-first century reveals a shortcoming to reading “Song of Myself” as participating in a trans-corporeal environmental worldview—namely, his belief in the environment’s unlimited capacity to self-correct. Although Whitman minimizes the role of a God, he is firmly grounded in the Deistic view of the world as an intelligently designed system. As a result, his descriptions of the ways in which human and nonhuman bodies interact often has a mechanical quality—the world is composed of “parts” which will inevitably return to a relative path of progress in spite of any human actions. In one passage he writes,

There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage;

If I and you and the worlds and all beneath or upon their surfaces, and all the palpable life, were this moment reduced to a pallid float, it would not avail in the long run,

We should surely bring up again where we now stand,

And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther. (1855 39)

Living and writing in a time before the observed human capacity for global environmental disruption, this critique of Whitman is without question anachronistic. However, when reading Whitman in the context of anthropogenic devastation, the potentially insidious consequences of our trans-corporeality must be accounted for. We have had the capacity, since Whitman’s time, to permanently disrupt environmental cycles, and have now more than ever. While Whitman presents the optimistic side of

human interrelatedness with the more-than-human-world, we also must bear in mind the glaringly negative consequences our neglect of this interrelatedness can produce when reading in the twenty-first century.

From the perspective of political and ethical environmentalisms the implications of reading Whitman in this fashion are multifarious. The human subject becomes decentered in the trans-corporeal model, no longer a lone subject, but a node in an intersubjective world. The permeable bodies present in “Song of Myself” present an epitomized democratic worldview, in which it is impossible to account for the human body without recognizing its interrelations with the more-than-human-world. “Nature” is no longer something that is “out there,” subjected to alienation but something in which the human is always already a part. In the midst of twenty-first century global anthropocentric climate change and mass extinction, the humanities can contribute to the efforts of the hard sciences by interacting with texts in ways that are environmentally efficacious. Reading Whitman in this light, as Stacy Alaimo writes, can reveal,

how profoundly the sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood (*Natures* 95).<sup>24</sup>

This model of reading “Song of Myself” can serve the purpose of bridging the gap between the discourses of the sciences and the humanities by refusing the disjuncture between the

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<sup>24</sup> This quote from Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures* refers to her reading what she calls “material memoirs.” However, I believe it also adequately summarizes the consequences of reading Whitman in light of trans-corporeal theory. For more on “material memoirs” see Alaimo (85-112)

supposedly objective knowledges of science and subjective literary accounts. Thus, Whitman can serve as a type of “counter-memory” which Ladelle McWhorter describes as,

An important ethical practice—first of all because it helps us escape from the cage of official truth and start thinking again and second because it is the very stuff of alternative matrices of knowledge and power, because it can function as the building material of alternative systems of meaning (*Natures* 95).

The acknowledgement that the environment permeates all forms inevitably extends the project of reading literary texts in a way that considers environmental politics and ethics beyond any single reading of Whitman. As Timothy Morton writes,

Nowadays we’re used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it (*Thought* 11)

Conclusion:

Inhale. Exhale. As I am typing this I am breathing the air of a world in extremis. Our current practice of global anthropocentric environmental degradation gives the issues discussed by ecomaterialism an undeniable primacy. If we are to continue as a species, we must reformulate our relationship to the more-than-human-world. As a student of literature, what can I do?

This paper was an attempt to respond to that question by presenting a model for reading Whitman in an ecologically conscious manner. The 1855 edition of “Song of

Myself” presents bodies as physiologically material. The primacy of the sensuous situates the human experience of self as always-already embedded in the corporeal world; our bodies filter and furnish our intellectual capacities. These bodies then become permeable, de-centering the human in a proto-posthumanist fashion, and demonstrating the interrelatedness of material forms.

Western society typically associates “Nature” with something that is “out there,” something that is not-human, the forests and wild spaces that fill the gaps between metropolitan areas. This critical model would suggest a reconceptualization of “Nature” in Whitman’s poetry as something that the human is always-already a part of. The human is inseparable from what has been traditionally conceived as “Nature.” As global climate change has demonstrated, humanity is implicated in a web of interconnected environmental phenomena that shape our social, political, and biological lives. As theoretical models such as critical race theory, queer theory, and Marxist theory have shown, literary works are shaped by race, gender, and economics whether or not those texts mention race, gender, and economics explicitly. Certainly in the midst of our current environmental crisis, more-than-human forces must be seen as directly influencing the production of texts as well. I would hope to inspire other students and readers in general to reconsider their own selves as always-already intermeshed within a system of interacting agencies comprising the more-than-human-world. Our relationship to the more-than-human-world is too important to continue existing on the margins of human consciousness. After all, if we do not change, we may not have that much time left.

Appendix: “Are you proud to have gotten at the meaning of poems?”

It is important to acknowledge that many of the material flows between bodies and the more-than-human-world mentioned in the previous in this paper are not always readily perceived at the level of the individual. Whitman grapples with the inability of language to capture phenomenon with precise verisimilitude—the inevitable gap between perceiver-perceived, text-world, poet-reader. His poetry is not simple enough to presume that the totality of the more-than-human material world can be rendered linguistically. Scholars have examined Whitman’s negotiation of the aperture separating perceived from lexical

representation. Paul Outka, using a Whitmanesque term—the “certain free margin”—argues Whitman’s discourses assume certain level of abstraction, vagueness, and ambiguity, portraying the interaction of human and more-than-human as “an existent but unmapped territory of intersecting constructions, all of which can be proffered because none of them have final authority” (*(De)composing* 43). M. Jimmie Killingsworth classifies these instances as the “unspeakableness” of Whitman’s poetry. Whitman presents a more-than-human world that often resists discursive categorization. One of the many unanswered questions in “Song of Myself”—“Is this then a touch?”—utilizes the demonstrative “this” that structuralists refer to as a shifter, drawing the reader’s attention to a force that is *touching*, which in this case remains unspecified (Killingsworth 18). This “unspeakableness” of the touching force undermines the system of mastery by which humanity constructs the external world through discourse. It suggests instead an intersubjective space between human and more-than-human.

These between spaces, or liminal spaces that Whitman confronts are ultimately the space the poem itself occupies. As Timothy Morton writes,

Things are a kind of liminal space made of other things. Art happens in and is this liminal space, this *between*, which is just what a thing is: a meeting place of other beings (“thing” is Old English for “meeting place”). This meeting place is not ontically given or, in other words, metaphysically (constantly) present. Rather, it is slot through and through with nothingness. (*Material* 279, emphasis in original)

Whitman ultimately confronts this “nothingness” or “unspeakableness” or “certain free margin,” recognizing it in all things, and refusing to reduce and parcel in an attempt to concretize phenomena in order to make them “real” according to empiricist

epistemologies. Morton suggests coming to terms with the “nothingness” in all things is the foremost problem, which needs to be addressed by material Ecocriticism (*Material* 279). The way in which anthropocentric environmental degradation exists in the world and permeates the human body is not observable at the level of individual perception as a discrete, ever-present phenomenon. Thus, the ultimate environmental ethical reading of “Song of Myself” does not only recognize material interchanges across bodies which shatter corporeal boundaries, but also recognizes how the text confronts their “nothingness” in a way which, although not decisive, is illuminating in its revealing of fundamental issues of human perception, and how that perception influences interaction with the more-than-human-world.

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