Melville in the Asylum: Literature, Sociology, Reading

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We are all role players. This is the key claim of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956; 1959), the book that catapulted Erving Goffman to prominence both within the discipline of sociology and far beyond it. As we move from one scene of face-to-face interaction to another, he contends, we rely on highly refined skills of self-presentation, making minute, split-second adjustments in posture, gesture, and speech to "control the impression" that others receive of us (15). And yet, our performances can still flop. "When individuals witness a show that was not meant for them," Goffman argues, "they may, then, become disillusioned about this show as well as about the show that was meant for them. The performer, too, may become confused" (136). These effects, disillusionment for the audience and confusion for the performer, arise because we try mightily to play whatever role a given audience demands, while suggesting that this role is not only our "most important" but also reflective of our "most essential and characteristic attributes" (136). To substantiate this claim, Goffman quotes a passage from Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change* (1953)—which begins, "We are all, in our compartmentalized responses, like the man who is a tyrant in his office and a weakling among his family" (qtd. 136)—followed by a passage from Herman Melville's *White-Jacket; or The World in a Man-of-War* (1850). The Melville quote portrays a typically reticent "commodore" who becomes "exceedingly chatty" when he leaves his ship, and this quote is meant to exemplify how the "problems" discussed by Burke "can become especially acute when one of the individual's shows depends upon an elaborate stage setting" such as the frigate *Neversink,* the setting of *White-Jacket* (qtd. 137). For a moment, then, Goffman

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plays the role of literary critic rather than sociologist, invoking a theoretical source (Burke) to organize an interpretation of a literary text (Melville) as a means of conceptualizing a broader set of nonliterary "problems" that his argument seeks to address. Typical of Goffman, such role-playing raises two interrelated questions, both situated at the juncture of sociology and literature, that I aim to explore in this essay. First, how can imaginative literature participate in the production of sociological knowledge? And, second, what new knowledge might emerge from literary critics who are following Goffman's lead in reverse: playing the role of sociologists, however problematically?

I approach these questions by analyzing one striking case of literary and sociological intersection: the presence of Melville's *White-Jacket* in Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961). While the sociologist cites the novelist once in *The Presentation of Self,* he cites him 15 times in *Asylums.* Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork at St. Elizabeths Psychiatric Hospital in Washington, DC, *Asylums* is a capacious study of "total institutions," such as prisons, naval ships, and boarding schools, where individuals are cordoned off from "wider society" and forced to lead highly regimented lives (ix, 5). Throughout his career, Goffman relied on a variety of literary sources to illustrate his arguments, but his use of Melville in the essays that constitute his 1961 book is especially compelling and variegated.[1] Like many of Melville's readers, including several generations of literary critics, he was drawn to the novel's critical treatment of corporal punishment and autocratic rule in the US Navy.[2] His first quotation from *White-Jacket* depicts a flogging scene, which he likens to electroshock therapy in the psychiatric hospital (33–34). He claims that "when an individual witnesses a physical assault," whether by lash or by electrode, that individual may "suffer the permanent mortification of having (and being known to have) taken no action," as when the narrator of *White-Jacket,* forced to watch the "sufferings" of his companions, stands passively and registers "the omnipotent authority under which he lives" (34). In general, Goffman seems to accept the interpretation offered by William Plomer in the introduction to the Grove Press edition that he cites.[3] "This book is classed as a novel," Plomer contends, yet "it is chiefly documentary and descriptive," detailing everyday life aboard a man-of-war in order to advance a "propagandist purpose," namely the elimination of flogging from the US Navy (v–vi). Nonetheless, while Goffman returns throughout *Asylums* to what Melville's narrator calls "the shocking misery of the lash" (265), he also concentrates on many other aspects of the novel, which he reads as a "report" on social life within a "total institution," in this case a frigate, wherein "like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an

appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (33, xiii).[4]

To read *White-Jacket* in this way is not to elide the literary qualities of the novel—the ebullient voice of the narrator; the striking imagery of the ship; the embellished descriptions of character; the thematic structure—but to showcase them in the process of deploying *White-Jacket* toward the production of sociological knowledge. It is also to treat Melville himself as a quasi-sociologist whose work is in no way purged of its nuance and complexity when read as an effort to apprehend social experience, which is, of course, highly nuanced and complex itself. Frequently turning to imaginative literature—*Asylums* also makes reference to George Orwell, Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Czeslaw Milosz; other books, such as *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), are even more heavily illustrated by literary texts—Goffman assumed that it could proffer unique and valuable contributions to sociological thought. I explore this assumption in the second portion of this essay by reading Melville as a particular kind of sociologist: a student of what Goffman calls the "interaction order." My analysis concentrates on *White-Jacket*, but also attends to other works in the Melville archive (*Typee* [1846], *Mardi* [1849], *Moby-Dick* [1851], and "I and My Chimney" [1856]) that reveal his sociological imagination as I want to understand it. Before turning to these works, though, I develop an account of Goffman's project and its import for literary studies in the twenty-first century. Because Goffman was "an unusually lucid, colloquial, and witty writer," as Louis Menand puts it, he not only "spoke to people in other fields" but also enjoyed a wide general readership during his lifetime (296). He has, I hope to demonstrate, a renewed significance for us today.

Over the past few years, Goffman has made something of a comeback. "[T]he recent return of Goffman's microsociological work," argues Mark Seltzer, "is part of the incrementalist turn across a range of recent literary and cultural studies," by which he means the emphasis on "scaled-down" objects of analysis such as "minor characters," "infantile subjects," and "little resistances" (727). In his own scholarship, Seltzer approaches Goffman as an analyst of "social interaction rituals" in order to apprehend "a mode of sociality premised on mutual aversion" rather than mutual attraction (724, 725). Heather Love has turned to Goffman as well in recent years. She aligns him with Bruno Latour, a founder of actor-network-theory (ANT), suggesting that both sociologists engage in "practices of description" that could inspire a new paradigm for literary analysis: "close but not deep" reading (375). Her argument is that these sociologists, by emphasizing meticulous description as opposed to heroic interpretation, offer literary critics a model of reading that would be

sensitive to the particularities of a given literary text, as in "close reading" and New Criticism, but that would not reinforce the values of humanism which have been called into question by feminism, postcolonial studies, African-American studies, diaspora studies, queer theory, and other politically oriented subfields. With this argument, Love has contributed influentially to the vibrant conversation about *reading* that is occurring across the disciplines of English and comparative literature. In the absence of an obviously dominant hermeneutic paradigm, many critics are exploring the question of how to read.[5] At this moment of disciplinary self-reflection, I want to suggest, Goffman's treatment of Melville makes a compelling case for reading imaginative literature as a means of apprehending sociality. While the sociologist did observe real social interactions during his fieldwork, he also looked to *White-Jacket* as a repository of sociological data. I aim to show that his use of Melville's novel as a kind of evidence not only exemplifies a productive interplay between sociology and literature but also aligns him with Latour in a way that Love and others have not identified.

For Latour and the other thinkers associated with ANT, the social is not an exclusively human domain, but a network of humans and nonhumans, embodied subjects and material objects, persons and things. Although Goffman was never an actor-network-theorist —he died, in 1982, just as Latour was beginning to develop his conception of the social through the study of scientific practice— *Asylums* and other books are remarkably attentive to the nonhuman. In this regard, they set a precedent for Latour's sociology and for the "new materialisms" that have taken hold within many different domains of scholarly research, including literary criticism.[6] The pioneering work of Bill Brown (*A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* [2003]), for instance, demonstrates how literature can disclose what Heidegger called "the thingness of things" (112) or what Lukács called "the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things" (92). By engaging a wide range of theoretical discourses, including ANT, Marxism, Heideggerian ontology, psychoanalysis, and cultural anthropology, he and other critics have developed new approaches to the problem of *materiality,* conceptualizing things as distinct from both objects and commodities.[7] By looking to Goffman, an idiosyncratic sociologist, I mean to build on this scholarship while adjusting the focus from materiality to *sociality*. My emphasis falls not on individual things and their "qualitative and material" properties, but on the *interactions* (a key term in Goffman) between human subjects and nonhuman objects, persons and things, within well-defined social sites. Lighted throughout by Melville's depiction of the *USS Neversink,* the setting of *White-Jacket, Asylums* is above all an effort to apprehend the

sociality of those sites that Goffman terms "total institutions." It is also a fascinating example of literary and sociological intersection. As such, it shares important affinities with Latour's work, including his early ethnography of science—*Laboratory Life* (1979)—as well as his more recent theoretical writing.

1. Nonhumans in the Interaction Order

In October 1975, a young French sociologist arrived in La Jolla, California. Even though he spoke little English and had no knowledge of the hard sciences, he would spend 21 months conducting ethnographic research in Roger Guillemin's laboratory at the Jonas Salk Institute for Biological Studies, a complex designed by the renowned architect Louis Kahn. The book that would emerge from this research, Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life,* won many fans while provoking widespread controversy in what eventually would be called the "culture wars."[8] This is the origin of ANT. "The study of scientific practice," Latour writes in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to ANT* (2005), "provided the main impetus" for the "alternative definition of the social" that he and his colleagues have been developing over the past three decades (7).[9] According to this definition, the social is not a special domain of reality that can be neatly cordoned off from other domains, such as the natural, and it is not the sum total of all human relationships and the mysterious forces that govern them. Rather, for actor-network-theorists the social is, as Rita Felski puts it, "just . . . the act and the fact of association, the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks" (578). Such networks comprise both human subjects and nonhuman objects. "How long can a social connection be followed," Latour asks in *Reassembling the Social,* "without objects taking the relay?" (78). Not very long. This is the central claim of his sociology. While observing "the routinely occurring minutiae of scientific activity" within Guillemin's lab at the Salk, he became convinced that the constituents of the "material environment" (such as the gamma counter, the refrigerator, the workbench) do not merely constitute the passive stage on which sociality unfolds (69). Rather, as he would go on to argue in *Reassembling the Social*, they must be understood as full-fledged actors in the drama of social relations.

Goffman formulated his own version of this point in *Asylums* and elsewhere. Although he and Latour are by no means perfectly compatible, their respective projects share key similarities. First, both make use of ethnographic methods: participant observation and meticulous description of human behavior within well-defined sites, such as Giullemin's lab (in Latour's case) and St Elizabeths Psychiatric

Hospital (in Goffman's). Second, both deploy the rhetoric of drama and performance (actor, role, player, and so on) throughout their writings. This rhetoric marks each thinker's sustained engagement with literary theory—for Goffman, the "dramatism" of Burke in particular; for Latour, the work of Michel Serres, Thomas Pavel, Jacques Fontanille, Louis Marin, and especially A. J. Greimas, from whom he derives the crucial distinction between *actor* and *actant*.[10] Finally, imaginative literature itself plays a part in both sociologies, notably in their respective attempts to apprehend the nonhuman. "[W]hen everything else has failed," Latour quips in *Reassembling the Social,* "the resource of fiction can bring—through the use of counterfactual history, thought experiments, and 'scientifiction'—the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense" (82). He means, in other words, that literary texts can help us to understand our relationship to the nonhuman world. This claim is premised on his enduring sense that "sociologists have a lot to learn from artists," and even a cursory glance at Goffman's books, which are lavishly illustrated by literary texts and cultural artifacts, would suggest that he shared this view (82).

Still, despite these affinities, Latour only refers twice to Goffman in *Reassembling the Social.* In the first instance, he is cited favorably as an authority on the "thick imbroglio" of social interaction, whereas in the second, Latour criticizes him for conceptualizing the nonhuman in a "primitive" way "as a backdrop for the stage on which human social actors play the main roles" (46, 84). While Goffman does tend to emphasize the human—"[m]y immediate object in doing field work at St. Elizabeths," he explains in the preface to *Asylums,* "was to try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate, as this world is subjectively experienced by him" (ix)—his understanding of the nonhuman is hardly primitive. Indeed, through incisive analyses of both built space and material things within the total institution, *Asylums* develops a sophisticated account of the way that nonhumans participate in what he called the "interaction order," the regime of face-to-face exchange. On the one hand, he aims to show how the "encompassing or total character" of total institutions "is often built right into the physical plant" in the form of "locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors" (4); on the other hand, he seeks to understand transgression, literally to apprehend the "geography" of "[l]icense" (230). Among the most memorable passages in the book are those that explore "spaces where the inmate could openly engage in a range of tabooed activities with some degree of security" (230).

In addition, one of Goffman's overarching concerns is the relationship between self and site, or the way that "the physical facts of an establishment can be explicitly employed to frame the conception

a person takes of himself" (150). This concern, which appears throughout his writings, first emerged in the master's thesis that he submitted to the department of sociology at the University of Chicago in 1949. For that project, he was supposed to be using a psychological instrument, the Thematic Apperception Test, to interview housewives in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in order to examine the link between social class and personality. While speaking with interviewees in their own homes, however, he secretly gathered data on living room furnishings and other elements of the domestic interior. His wit shines in the write-up: "Finally, subjects frequently admitted that they knew nothing about furniture, and in some cases this seemed to be an honest statement of fact" ("Some Characteristics" 69). By the end of his career, he was no less attentive to the nonhuman. "The Interaction Order," his posthumously published Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, begins with a self-reflexive commentary on the way that architecture mediates the spectacle of social relations—"within the girdle of these walls, a worldly pageantry is reenacted" ("Interaction" 234)—which echoes the opening of *The Presentation of Self*: "I mean this report to serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied, especially the kind of social life that is organized within the physical confines of a building or plant" (xi).

Goffman's abiding interest in the nonhuman, in both physical sites and material things, helps to account for why he was so attracted to Melville. In the preface to the first English edition of *White-Jacket,* which is included in the Grove Press volume that Goffman cites, Melville explains that his intention was "to give some idea of the interior life in a man of war" in order to "paint general life in the Navy" (xv). Thus the novel comprises a series of "illustrative scenes" set aboard the *Neversink,* whose sheer material bulk is vividly and repeatedly figured: "And with its long rows of port-hole casements, each revealing the muzzle of a canon, a man-of-war resembles a three-storey house in a suspicious part of the town, with a basement of infinite depth, and ugly-looking fellows gazing out at the windows" (xv, 83).[11] The limits of the diegesis, moreover, are set firmly by what Goffman would call the "physical confines" of the frigate, even when the narrator is tempted to explore other settings: "But though Rio is one of the most magnificent bays in the world; though the city itself contains many striking objects . . . ay, though much might be said of all this, yet I must forebear, if I may, and adhere to my one proper object, *the world in a man-of-war*" (158). Like *Asylums, White-Jacket* has a claustrophobic feel, which is really to say that Goffman, who was meticulous in his selection of "illustrative materials," found in Melville's novel an apposite illustration of social life within a confined, strictly delimited physical space (*Presentation* xi).

But there is more to his interest in this particular text. Drawing on his own experience as a sailor aboard the *United States,* Melville renders the "*world in a man-of-war*" through a practice of description that is similar to Goffman's, despite the obvious difference in genre.[12] Just as the novelist details a specific ship and its crew in order to disclose "general life in the Navy"—which includes "[a] llusion" to "the past history of Navies" (xv)—so too the sociologist provides an exhaustive ethnographic account of one particular psychiatric hospital and its habitués as a means of generalizing about all "total institutions," including other hospitals as well as nursing homes, orphanages, prisons, POW camps, and monasteries (4–5). As Pierre Bourdieu explains, Goffman "endeavors to show that institutions which differ greatly in their declared purposes show striking similarities in their actual functioning" (112). Deploying Melville's writing toward this end, Goffman eschews the standard conventions of literary criticism. Instead of analyzing *White-Jacket* as a highly embellished and thoroughly fictionalized report on its author's actual naval experience, and instead of scrutinizing the opacity, ambiguity, and contradiction inherent in the textual medium, he treats the novel as a source of empirical data, on par with what he had observed during his year of fieldwork. This treatment chafes against our practices of reading and our uses of evidence, but it was highly productive for him, as it enabled the formation of original concepts. Reading Melville, in other words, helped Goffman to construct a conceptual vocabulary for apprehending social interaction.

Developing such a vocabulary was the central undertaking of his career. Just as Howard Becker notes his "penchant for inventing concepts, for giving names to things" (662), so too Fredric Jameson points out his "immense talent for inventing new terms and new names for his newly constructed social objects" (126). Although *Asylums* is best known for elaborating the concept of "total institutions"—which was, in fact, introduced to Goffman by his teacher Everett Hughes (Burns 142)—the book relies most heavily on Melville to develop the concept of "secondary adjustments," defined as "practices that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain forbidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means" (54–55). The account of "secondary adjustments" adds up to an examination of what might be called the material culture of the total institution. At the beginning of a long section devoted to "hospital underlife," Goffman writes:

> The first thing to note is the prevalence of *make-do's*. In every social establishment participants use available artifacts in a manner and for an end not officially intended, thereby modifying the conditions of life programmed for these individuals.

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> A physical reworking of the artifact may be involved, or merely an illegitimate context of use, in either case providing homely illustrations of the Robinson Crusoe theme. Obvious examples come from prisons, where, for example, a knife may be hammered from a spoon, drawing ink extracted from the pages of *Life* magazine, exercise books used to write betting slips, and cigarettes lit by a number of means—sparking an electric- light outlet, a homemade tinderbox, or a match split into quarters. While this transformation process underlies many complex practices, it can be most clearly seen where the practitioner is not involved with others (except in learning and teaching the technique), he alone consuming what he just produced. (207–8)

Nominalizing the compound verb "to make do" in describing a widespread practice of refabrication, Goffman's point here is that subjects within a total institution transform material objects as a means of altering their "conditions of life," however imperfectly.[13] While the passage itself refers to *Robinson Crusoe,* a footnote encourages the reader to "compare the naval equivalent" in *White-Jacket,* which first appears when the narrator discusses "the premature loss of hair" afflicting his shipmate: "This baldness was no doubt, in great part, attributable to . . . the hard, unyielding, and ponderous man-of-war and Navy regulation tarpaulin hat which, when new, is stiff enough to sit upon, and indeed, in lieu of his thumb, sometimes serves the common sailor for a bench" (Melville, *White Jacket* 189). By repurposing the hat as a bench, Goffman implies, these sailors pursue a "secondary adjustment" that subtly challenges the official order of the ship.

Material objects are crucial to other "secondary adjustments," as well. Some inmates keep a "stash," which Goffman defines as a "personal storage space that is concealed and/or locked" and filled with "more than one kind of illicit possession" (249). On the one hand, the stash may amount to no more than a trivial collection of treats and bric-a-brac—"cigarettes, candy, and newspapers" (*Asylums* 50)—hidden from the sort of scavengers and thieves that torment Melville's narrator: "If you lay anything down, and turn your back for a moment," Melville writes, "ten to one it is gone" (47). On the other hand, Goffman continues, it can become "almost a kind of lodgment for the self, a *churinga* in which the soul is felt to reside" (55). Although the act of collecting is always an act of self-constitution, the stash assumes a special significance for the inmate who has been "stripped of his possessions" upon entering the total institution (19).[14] "The admission procedure," Goffman explains, "entails a dispossession of property" wherein individuals are forced to part with their clothes and personal effects. They are "disinfected

of their identifications" and required to don "standard issue" attire, which is "uniform in character and uniformly distributed" (18–19). A botched "admissions procedure" opens *White-Jacket* and precipitates the central conflict of the plot. "It was not a *very* white jacket," begins the narrator, White Jacket, who is named after his frock coat. "The way I came to it was this. When our frigate lay in Callao, on the coast of Peru—her last harbor in the Pacific—I found myself without a *grego,* or sailor's surtout," and because "no pea-jackets could be had from the purser's steward . . . I employed myself, for several days, in manufacturing an outlandish garment of my own devising, to shelter me from the boisterous weather" (17).

Denied a "standard issue" uniform, in other words, White Jacket fabricates a "make-do." Goffman himself never quite makes this point, but *Asylums* does suggest an original way of understanding the eponymous figure. The white jacket, not unlike the white whale in *Moby-Dick,* takes on a vast array of meanings. Andrew Delbanco argues that it "signifies the narrator's puffed-up pride" (113), whereas Wai Chee Dimock, making almost the exact opposite claim, takes it to symbolize his lack of interiority: "That he should be named after his attire is only too fitting, for that is indeed what he is: not a person but a jacket, an outer garment, all surface and all visibility" (96). Samuel Otter expands on the theme of visibility in his trenchant reading of how Melville deploys the jacket to address the problem of race: "Melville here represents white skin as subject to the kind of anxious regard usually associated with black skin." Because the jacket is white, rather than the standard blue, the narrator stands out among his peers, rendering him an easy target for abuse. "The resonant joke here," Otter continues, "is that White-Jacket wishes to darken his skin so that he can conform to the appearance of the majority. The darker color will protect him and enable him to assimilate" (88). Although this argument is persuasive, the jacket is not only a metaphor for human skin but also a rather peculiar material thing: "a strange-looking coat, to be sure; of a Quakerish amplitude about the skirts; with an infirm, tumble-down collar" (17). And despite Melville's lavish use of metaphorical language in describing the jacket, it remains for the narrator a piece of "linen," a make-do that hardly does the job of a standard-issue sailor's surtout (17).

In fact, its very materiality poses the major problem that White Jacket seeks to resolve. "Water-proof it was not," he explains; "with such recklessness had I bequilted my jacket, that in a rainstorm I became a universal absorber; swabbing bone-dry the very bulwarks I leaned against" (18). The phrase "universal absorber" can be read as metaphorical or metafictional, but it is also literally true, which is why, on rainy days, White Jacket's "heartless shipmates" would "stand up against" him to keep dry, "so powerful was the capillary

attraction between this luckless jacket of [his] and all drops of moisture" (18). These shipmates, as Otter suggests, are less than kind to the narrator; one in particular, "old Brush," is especially cruel, for he denies White Jacket the can of paint that he needs both to waterproof his outerwear and to make himself less conspicuous: "Oh! how I execrated my luckless garment! how often I scoured the deck with it to give it a tawny hue! how often I supplicated the inexorable Brush, captain of the paint-room, for just one brushful of his invaluable pigment!" (124). Thus, two seemingly trivial things, a make-do and a can of paint, play major roles in the social drama of the novel; they are actors in the Latourian sense. Indeed, White Jacket's interactions with his shipmates are entirely mediated by his "famous white jacket," which not only distinguishes him from his peers and nearly gets him killed, more than once, but also functions as a sort of character in its own right, a companion and figure of address: "Jacket," cried I, "you must change your complexion!" (196, 85). So, the jacket not only appears as an unusual material thing and a dense symbol; it is also personified as an interlocutor. But while it assumes various guises throughout the novel, as thing or symbol or person or some combination thereof, it never ceases to be a social actor. In fact, these many guises animate its participation in the social world that Melville imagines.

Take, for instance, the scene where White Jacket attempts to convert his garment into what Goffman would call a "stash." Melville devotes a whole chapter, "Of the Pockets that Were in the Jacket," to this attempt. "I had accordingly provided it," White Jacket explains, "with a great variety of pockets, pantries, clothes-presses, and cupboards" (47). Given the prevalence of scavengers and thieves —which Goffman terms "illegitimate interlopers" (249)—he aims to construct an elaborate "storehouse" for his possessions (48): "The principle apartments, two in number, were placed in the skirts, with a wide, hospitable entrance from the inside; two more, of smaller capacity, were planted in each breast, with folding-doors communicating, so that in case of emergency, to accommodate any bulky articles, the two pockets in each breast could be thrown into one. There were, also, several unseen recesses behind the arras; insomuch, that my jacket, like an old castle, was full of winding stairs, and mysterious closets, crypts, and cabinets; and like a confidential writing-desk, abounded in snug little out-of-the-way lairs and hiding places for the storage of valuables" (47). The architectural conceit continues to develop as White Jacket beholds his creation: "For some time after completing my jacket, and getting the furniture and household stores in it, I thought that nothing could exceed it for convenience" (48). And yet, as soon as his "heartless shipmates" realize that "the white jacket was used for a storehouse," they target him: "I noticed a parcel

of fellows skulking about after me wherever I went. To a man, they were pickpockets, and bent upon pillaging me." Thus, the jacket helps to establish a rather unfortunate order of interaction: "that same night," White Jacket laments, "I found myself minus several valuable articles" (49). Moreover, the architectural conceit—"bent upon pillaging me"—can be understood to hyperbolize Goffman's claim that the "stash" constitutes a "lodgment for the self," a material manifestation of a metaphysical entity. Eventually, after certain "scoundrels" do pillage him, White Jacket "mason[s] up his lockers and pantries," thereby remaking the make-do that makes him who he is, both for his shipmates and for us (48, 49). No longer a stash, it nonetheless remains a visible extension of the self, which has profound effects within social space: "how easy, in that mob of incognitoes, to individualise '*that white jacket*,' and dispatch him on the errand!" (124). Bringing together Goffman and Latour, then, we might understand this "hapless garment" as the key nonhuman actor within the interaction order of the novel.

2. Herman Melville, Sociologist

With the help of these two thinkers, in other words, *White-Jacket* can be read as an effort to form an impression of the social that includes the nonhuman. But Goffman was not trying to provide anything like a hermeneutic paradigm for the novel. Rather, he treats it as a "report" on social experience or as an extraordinary body of field notes. He never says as much, but he does name Melville "[a] fine source" on "so many aspects of underlife" at the beginning of a long footnote that quotes four paragraphs from the "Pockets" chapter of *White-Jacket* (252). As in this note, he typically cites the novelist as an empirical authority without commenting on the formal or stylistic properties of the prose, a practice that is bound to strike scholars of literature as seriously flawed insofar as it neglects to account for textual mediation. Yet his basic intuition, that Melville is a sociological writer, is not without precedent in literary studies. "He is as systematic as a sociologist," wrote C. L. R. James in 1953, "and the first thing he does in *Moby-Dick* is to show the existing world as he knew it" (36). James anticipated a prominent line of more recent scholarship: Susan Mizruchi's reading of *Billy Budd* (1924) as an engagement with the "questions and even assumptions" of the social sciences as they were emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century (93); Cesare Casarino's argument that White-Jacket, as narrator, "takes up the role of the sociologist" (33); and Lawrence Buell's examination of "Melville's fictive social microcosms" (144). Given the precedent set by these scholars, Goffman's treatment of

White-Jacket in *Asylums* is perhaps best received across the disciplinary divide as a prompt to reexamine what could be called, after C. Wright Mills, the "sociological imagination" of Herman Melville.

Mills himself attended to the relay between literature and sociology in Melville's era. "In the past," he wrote in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), "literary men as critics and historians made notes on England and journeys to America. They tried to characterize societies as wholes, and to discern their moral meanings. Were Tocqueville and Taine alive today, would they not be sociologists?" (17). As John Guillory has demonstrated, this question not only "haunts the practice of literary study in a deep and unacknowledged way" but also points to the porous boundary between imaginative literature and sociological writing in the period just prior to the solidification of sociology as an academic discipline (483). "From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards," explains Wolf Lepenies, "literature and sociology contested with one another the claim to offer the key orientation for modern civilization and to constitute the guide to living appropriate to industrial society" (1). Alongside his analysis of writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert, we can place Mizruchi's study of American authors whose work was shaped in crucial ways by the premises and problems of the emergent social sciences; for her, "Melville's understanding of religion," particularly as it manifests in *Billy Budd,* reveals his intellectual affinity with "many contemporary social scientists," such as Winwood Reade and Robertson Smith (92–93). Nevertheless, Goffman shows no interest whatsoever in the fact that Melville's writings engaged the concerns of his discipline during its formative era, the era when, as Mizruchi puts it, "the emerging social sciences were the subject of much debate in England and America" (93). Rather, his citations of *White-Jacket* suggest that he was drawn to the novelist as an intellectual ally: a fellow student of the interaction order.

Picking up where Goffman leaves off, then, I want to propose that Melville was a keen analyst of social interaction whose fiction is especially attuned to the role of the nonhuman. Although, as Peter Wagner explains, the nascent discipline of sociology was fixated on "connections among human beings," Melville was compelled by the relationship between humans and nonhumans (133). Consider, for example, chapter 15 of his first novel, *Typee: A Peep and Polynesian Life* (1846). Melville's most explicitly ethnographic text, *Typee* offers an embellished account of its author's stint among the Taipi in Nuku Hiva, an island of the South Seas Marquesas, and its 15th chapter is devoted to "[t]he celebrity of the bread-fruit tree" (114).[15] After portraying this "grand and towering object," the narrator goes on to delineate the collective labor of transforming its fruit into food (114). "At certain seasons of the year," he explains, "the islanders

assemble in harvest groups" to begin a multi-step process: first the "trees are stripped of their nodding burdens"; next the fruit is transformed into "a blended mass of a doughy consistency" called "Tutao"; after that it is baked into a substance called "Amar"; and finally "the Amar is changed into Poee-Poee," a "pudding-like" substance that appears "conspicuous[ly]" on any "Typee bill of fare" (116, 114). Melville's description of this process forms part of his larger project of elaborating the ordinary customs and practices of the Taipi, but this chapter is notable for its placement of a nonhuman entity—"a grand and towering object"—at the center of social life. The bread-fruit tree is, indeed, a nonhuman actor: when it bears fruit, it sets in motion a chain of activities, at once laborious and leisurely, that constitute important collective rituals.

Yet this is not at all to downplay Melville's intense fascination with human types.[16] Throughout *White-Jacket,* his "restless dissecting consciousness" is on display as he develops a typology of sailors and officers aboard the *Neversink* (Otter 4). He meant this typology to give some impression of the social whole: the "characters" in the novel, he wrote in an 1850 letter to R. H. Dana, Jr., are "intended to furnish samples of a tribe" (161). Thus, the third chapter, "A Glance at the Principle Divisions into which a Man-of-war's Crew is Divided," presents a colorful catalogue of tribesmen: "sea-dandies" who maintain a highly polished appearance; "Jimmy Duxes—sorry chaps, who never put foot in rattlin, or venture above the bulwarks"; "Troglodites or *Holders*, who burrow, like rabbits in warrens"; and a litany of "mates" who fall outside these "principle divisions" (22–23). Three chapters later, he offers an even more detailed anatomy of the officers aboard the *Neversink,* from the commodore and the captain to the lieutenants, forward officers, and midshipmen, "terrible little boys, cocking their caps at alarming angles and looking fierce as young roosters" (37–38). And in between these two chapters, he lionizes one particular shipmate, Jack Chase, who "was better than a hundred common mortals" (26). Years later, he would dedicate *Billy Budd* to the real man who inspired this character, the "noble first captain of the top" (25).

Notwithstanding Melville's treatment of individual characters and human typologies, I mean to direct attention to those moments in *White-Jacket* where nonhumans are figured as dynamic participants in the interaction order of the ship. Such moments reveal another dimension of his sociological imagination. During the flogging episodes, for instance, "the lash," as both a device of punishment and a symbol of power, mediates the hierarchical relationships among officers (who are not flogged) and sailors (who at "any moment may be flogged" [234]). There are other significant examples that have received less critical scrutiny.[17] "You are amazed," White Jacket tells

us, by the "continual touching of caps between officers on board a man-of-war," for they communicate so much and so often by this simple gesture "that the fronts of their caps look jaded, lack-lustre, and worn; sometimes slightly oleaginous" (274–75). Socializing with each other by manipulating a material object, these officers are not unlike a different "club" aboard the *Neversink* whose members form a "community of pipes," which is part of the "Ancient and Honourable Old Guard of Smokers all round the world" (364). As these men, "solac[ing] their souls with a whiff," reinforce their "vapoury bond," they conjure for White Jacket other images of convivial sociality facilitated by material objects: "Nor was it an ill thing for the Indian sachems to circulate their calumet tobacco-bowl—even as our forefathers circulated their punch-bowl—in token of peace, charity, and goodwill" (364). Whether filled with tobacco or punch, Melville suggests, a bowl can participate in, even help to constitute, an amiable order of interaction.

A similar suggestion is more powerfully rendered across the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Recall the initial encounter between Ishmael and Queequeg that occurs in a dark room of the "gable-ended Spouter-Inn" (12). At first, their interaction is distressing and hectic, but it very quickly becomes genial. Silently and anxiously lying in Queequeg's bed, Ishmael watches the harpooner reach for his pipe tomahawk: "He examined the head of it for an instant, and then holding it to the light, with his mouth at the handle, he puffed out great clouds of tobacco smoke. The next moment the light was extinguished, and this wild cannibal, tomahawk between his teeth, sprang into bed with me." Chaos ensues as they clumsily grope and grunt in the dark. "Who-e debel you?" cries Queequeeg; "you no speak-e, dam-e, I kill-e." A terrified Ishmael then cries for the landlord, Peter Coffin, who arrives and reassures him that Queequeg "wouldn't harm a hair on [his] head" (23). After Coffin convinces the harpooner "to stash his tomahawk there, or pipe, whatever you call it," the two characters settle into bed, blissfully: "I turned in," Ishmael notes, "and never slept better in my life" (24). This is how Ishmael and Queequeg begin to forge their much-remarked intimacy.[18] And Queequeg's tomahawk, at first so terrifying to Ishmael, soon comes to play a central role in the burgeoning of their bond: "For now I liked nothing better than to have Queequeg smoking by me, even in bed, because he seemed to be full of such serene household joy then. I no more felt unduly concerned for the landlord's policy of insurance. I was only alive to the condensed confidential comfortableness of sharing a pipe and blanket with a real friend. With our shaggy jackets drawn about our shoulders, we now passed the Tomahawk from one to the other, till slowly there grew over us a blue hanging tester of smoke, illuminated by the flame of the new-lit

lamp" (54). This interaction order includes both humans and nonhumans. Within this "serene household," the early development of their friendship is facilitated by the sharing of both tomahawk and blanket.[19] Other nonhuman entities participate, as well. Queequeg's idol, "Yojo," orders him to send Ishmael alone to select their whaling vessel, and both characters are "obliged to acquiesce" (68–69). As the two characters are becoming "bosom friends," they troll the docks side-by-side: "We borrowed a wheelbarrow, and embarking our things, including my own poor carpet-bag, and Queequeg's canvas sack and hammock, away we went." Onlookers are surprised to see them "upon such confidential terms . . . wheeling the barrow by turns" (58). Passed back and forth like the tomahawk the night before, the wheelbarrow jostles together their possessions, forming a "stash" that materializes not the individual self, but the entanglement of self and other.

Still, as Melville implies in *White-Jacket,* nonhuman entities can also participate in less sanguine orders of interaction. The eponymous white jacket not only attracts pickpockets but also occasions ridicule. Peeved by his make-do—"Besides, was it not a horrible jacket? To how many annoyances had it subjected me?" (196)—White Jacket decides to put it up for auction, thereby situating it at the very center of the interaction order of the *Neversink* as it appears in chapter 47. When the voluble auctioneer tries to get a bid for the garment, the "noble tars" in the audience first recognize it—"'Arn't that *the white jacket*?' '*The white jacket!*' cried fifty voices in response; '*the white jacket!*'" (197)—and then begin to fire insults its way: "I won't bid on that 'ere bunch of old swabs, unless you put ten pounds of soap with it" (198). Hiding nearby, White Jacket is utterly dejected: "While this scene was going forward, and my white jacket was thus being abused, how my heart swelled within me! Thrice was I on the point of rushing out of my hiding-place, and bearing it off from derision" (199). Insofar as the jacket can be understood as a material manifestation of the self, or as what Goffman would term "a *churinga* in which the soul is felt to reside" (55), White Jacket longs to interrupt the auction in order to halt an attack that is really directed at him. But Melville seems to be making a somewhat different point. Dramatizing the narrator's intensely ambivalent feelings toward his "unfortunate but indispensible garment," this chapter points to the complexity of their relationship. Nothing excites the passions of the narrator quite like his "immortal white jacket," which brings him both great joy ("For presto! the shirt was a coat!" [17]) and acute aggravation—all the way through the climactic scene, near the very end of the book, when he finally discards it after it nearly drowns him: "Sink! sink! oh shroud! thought I; sink forever! Accursed jacket that thou art!" (371).

For much of the novel, then, White Jacket and his jacket are never far apart, like Queequeg and his tomahawk; however, unlike the tomahawk, which facilitates a friendship, the jacket endears him to no one. Indeed, during the auction chapter and elsewhere, Melville imagines an interaction order in which two actors, one human and the other nonhuman, are positioned against an antagonistic throng of human others. Such an order also appears, albeit differently inflected, in *Redburn,* the other novel that Melville wrote between April and September of 1849.[20] "[A]s you are going to sea," Redburn's elder brother suggests in the opening paragraph, "suppose you take this shooting-jacket of mine along; it's just the thing—take it, it will save the expense of another" (3). Although "it's quite warm; fine long skirts, stout horn buttons, and plenty of pockets," Redburn will come to regret donning his brother's shooting-jacket, for it makes him the butt of many jokes: "I overheard a fellow in a great flapping sou'-wester cap say to another old tar in a shaggy monkey-jacket, 'Twig his coat, d'ye see the buttons, that chap ain't going to sea in a merchantman, he's going to shoot whales'" (19). Still, even as he acknowledges the inappropriateness of his attire, "suffer[ing] in many ways for [his] heedlessness, in going to sea so ill provided," Redburn nonetheless looks to his garment for succor: "I often thought what my friends at home would have said, if they could but get one peep at me. But I hugged myself in my miserable shooting-jacket" (75). Taking no comfort in imagining friends who would be as unkind as his shipmates, Redburn turns away from humans and toward the nonhuman, embracing his jacket as his jacket embraces him, relying on it, despite all the trouble it has caused, to perform the role of compassionate companion.

Melville was fascinated by this dynamic. His prose frequently depicts something like companionship between human subject and nonhuman object. *Mardi* is explicit: "Like a good wife," asserts Mardian philosopher Babbalanja, "a pipe is a friend and companion for life. And whoso weds a pipe, is no longer a bachelor. After many vexations, he may go home to that faithful counselor, and ever find it full of kind consolations" (376). Melville himself needed some consoling after he published *Redburn,* which he denigrated in a November 1849 journal entry as "trash" that was merely produced "to buy some tobacco" (13). Yet not even tobacco can console Ahab: "Oh, my pipe!" he asserts near the beginning of the hunt for Moby-Dick; "hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone!" (*Moby-Dick* 129). Becoming increasingly unhinged, he "tosses the still lighted pipe into the sea," divorcing what Babbalanja would call his "companion for life," since it provides no reprieve from his many "vexations," no mitigation of his maniacal desire. This "affair with the pipe," as Ishmael labels it, may seem trivial in the grand scheme

of *Moby-Dick,* but it points to Melville's serious and sustained effort to imagine nonhuman objects as friends (160). While the notion of friendship between human and nonhuman has attained wide currency in recent years, notably through the work of Miguel Tamen, it also animates Melville's writings—not just *Mardi, Redburn,* and *White-Jacket,* but other texts as well.[21] From my perspective, it is a key preoccupation of his sociological imagination, appearing in much of his work, but perhaps most powerfully rendered in the sketch entitled "I and My Chimney."

Published in *Putnam's* in March 1856, "I and My Chimney" is typically read as an engagement with the male sentimentalism of writers such as Donald Mitchell and George Curtis.[22] Deploying and possibly parodying the tropes of sentimentalism, Melville visualizes an interaction order in which the nonhuman plays a prominent role. The sketch is narrated by "a grey-headed old" man whose beloved and obviously phallic chimney is under siege by his wife and daughters, the other members of the household who long to see the structure either razed or remodeled to make room for a new hall (352). "How often my wife was at me," the narrator carps, "about that projected grand entrance-hall of hers, which was to be knocked clean through the chimney" (360). Like the auction chapter of *White-Jacket,* "I and My Chimney" pairs the narrator with a specific nonhuman actor and positions both against a faction of human antagonists, yet while White Jacket devotes considerable attention and energy to his jacket, the old man is altogether obsessed with his chimney, which maintains a bizarre, even absurd, power over him. "Sir," he instructs a meddlesome neighbor, "I look upon this chimney less as a pile of masonry than as a personage. It is the king of the house. I am but a suffered and inferior subject" (358). This explains why the "house would appear to have been built simply for the accommodation of [the] chimney," its "architectural arrangements" designed to his "chimney's" specifications (366, 353). At other moments, though, the old man describes their relationship in more egalitarian terms. "In dearth of other philosophical companionship, I and my chimney have to smoke and philosophize together," he explains; "sitting up so late as we do at it, a mighty smoke it is that we two smoky old philosophers make" (376). Although his wife "cares not a fig for [his] philosophical jabber," he and his chimney are "great cronies" in the life of the mind, convening a symposium while the rest of the house sleeps (376, 367).

This symposium includes a third participant: his pipe. Like Babbalanja, another inveterate philosophizer, he considers his pipe a "friend and companion for life," seeking its consolation and counsel amid the turmoil over the chimney. When his wife finally gives him an ultimatum—"either she or the chimney must quit the house"

(367)—he confers with his old pal: "Finding matters coming to such a pass, I and my pipe philosophized over them awhile, and finally concluded between us that little as our hearts went with the plan, yet for peace's sake, I might write out the chimney's death-warrant" (367). This decision seriously disrupts their friendship. "Considering that I, and my chimney, and my pipe, from having been so much together, were three great cronies," the old man rues, "the way in which I and my pipe, in secret, conspired together, as it were, against our unsuspicious old comrade—this may seem rather strange, if not suggestive of sad reflections upon us two" (367). Soon enough, however, he rescinds the "death-warrant" for "the goodliest of [their] trio," redoubling his effort to protect the chimney against a variety of vague threats as well as the hostile machinations of his wife, "incessantly besetting [him] with her terrible alacrity for improvement, which is a softer name for destruction" (367). Finally, after catching three brickbats "in the very act of commencing the long-threatened attack," he vows to keep constant watch over his comrade. "It is now some seven years since I have stirred from home," the story concludes; "My city friends all wonder why I don't come to see them, as in former times. They think I am getting sour and unsocial. Some say that I have become a sort of mossy old misanthrope, while all the time the fact is, I am simply standing guard over my mossy old chimney" (377).

How to understand this final image of Melville's odd sketch? It seems to anticipate Latour's central claim (the central claim of ANT) that the social comprises both humans and nonhumans. Although the narrator may appear "a mossy old misanthrope," he is in no way "unsocial" precisely because he passes the time with a nonhuman actor: his "sociable old chimney" (372). Goffman, I want to speculate, would offer a different yet complementary reading. Given that "I and My Chimney" is not "chiefly documentary," as Plomer describes *White-Jacket* in the edition that Goffman consulted, he would not consider it a "report" on actual social experience. But his treatment of literary texts in *Asylums* and elsewhere suggests that he would approach the sketch as a "fine source" on how built structures mediate social interactions. To bolster this interpretation, he might draw support from the biographical record, which includes Elizabeth Melville's account of their actual chimney at Arrowhead ("totally void of grace & beauty") as well as the notation that she made on her copy of the sketch: "All this about his wife, applied to his mother—who was very vigorous and energetic about the farm, etc."[23] While there is no indication that Goffman knew "I and My Chimney," he certainly appreciated Melville's depiction of the built environment in *White-Jacket,* which, like the sketch, thematizes the relationship between material sites and sociality. As I have already noted, this relationship preoccupied the sociologist from the time of his master's thesis through

the end of his life. In *Asylums,* specifically, when he takes up "the question of the setting" (227)—the question of how the "physical facts of an establishment" can influence both self-presentation and social interaction (148–51)—he often enlists Melville to develop his claims. This is the final example that I want to address.

Just as the sociologist relies on the novelist to elaborate the notion of "secondary adjustments," such as the make-do or the stash, so too he quotes lengthy passages from *White-Jacket* in his effort to define "free places," or sites within the total institution where "ordinary levels of surveillance and restriction [are] markedly reduced" (230). These sites "are backstage to the usual performance of staff-inmate relationships," meaning the official interaction order is suspended within their boundaries. "The staff did not know of the existence of such places," he observes, "or knew but either stayed away or tacitly relinquished their authority when entering them" (230). Hence "inmates and staff tacitly cooperated" in establishing "bounded physical spaces" (a patch of woods, an underground trench) for "tabooed activities" such as gambling and smoking (230–31). Melville provides what Goffman deems "[a] fine example" (231) in the chapter of *White-Jacket* entitled "The Chains": "Notwithstanding the domestic communism to which the seamen in a man-of-war are condemned, and the publicity in which actions the most diffident and retiring in their nature must be performed, there is yet an odd corner or two where you may sometimes steal away, and, for a few moments, almost be private. Chief among these places is the *chains,* to which I would sometimes hie during our pleasant homeward-bound glide over those pensive tropical latitudes. After hearing my fill of the wild yarns of our top, here would I recline—if not disturbed—serenely concocting information into wisdom" (305–6). If conditions are just right, White Jacket might attain a fleeting moment of privacy in the chains, "the small platform outside of the hull, at the base of the large shrouds leading down from the three mast-heads to the bulwarks" (306). Secluded from his shipmates, including other hideaways—especially the "tattooing artists" who engage in "the disagreeable business of *pricking*" (307)—he can inhabit "a feeling of relaxation and self-determination," as Goffman puts it, for in the chains "one could be one's own man" (231). His point is that a different self emerges at this site. Elsewhere in the total institution, the sociologist argues, the "self can be seen as something outside oneself that can be constructed, lost, and rebuilt," almost like the white jacket, a material thing whose shape and form are profoundly determined by the external forces, precisely because total institutions are "forcing houses for changing persons" (165, 12). At the "free place," though, the inmate obtains a momentary reprieve from the "endless game" of "building up a self and having it destroyed" (165).

Both *Asylums* and *White-Jacket* define the self as malleable yet also place-bound. "Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world," Goffman claims, "while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks" (320). He means this claim both figuratively *and* literally. The self is the product of an individual subject's negotiation with abstractions—this "social system" or that "institutional arrangement" (168)—as well as with concrete spatial particulars, the "solid buildings" and "cracks" that Latour would understand as nonhuman actors. Melville dramatizes this point when he suggests that "the whole present social framework" for the self of the sailor relies, literally, on a framework: the hull of a ship (308). "A man-of-war's man is only a man-of-war's man at sea," White Jacket contends, "and the sea is the place to learn what he is" (368). Hence "the popular conceit concerning the sailor" is often inaccurate because "ashore he is no longer a sailor, but a landsman for the time" (368). Ashore, his self-presentation is radically different; "numbers of men," for example, "who, during the cruise, had passed for exceedingly prudent, nay, parsimonious persons . . . —no sooner were these men fairly adrift in harbor, and under the influence of frequent quaffings, than their three-years-earned wages flew right and left" (367–68). Misers become "generous-hearted tars" off the frigate, treating "whole boarding houses of sailors [at] the bar" (368). This transformation fascinates White Jacket and exemplifies how the novel thematizes the interrelationship of self, site, and sociality.

As a site, the *Neversink* is one of Melville's many "fictive social microcosms," to recall Buell's fine phrase, figuring something like social totality: "a man-of-war is but this old fashioned world of ours afloat, full of all manner of characters—full of strange contradictions" (368). Yet it also delimits a particular social unit that is populated by a specific ensemble of human actors ("man-of-war's men") who conduct and thereby constitute themselves differently elsewhere.[24] Melville's sociological imagination preserves the tension between these two possibilities, while adumbrating analogies between social selves on the *Neversink* and elsewhere, which points to one last, crucial affinity between him and Goffman. "In men-of-war," Melville explains, "the galley, or cookery, on the gun-deck is the grand center of gossip and news among the sailors," and this site has so many analogues: "Metropolitan gentlemen have their club; provincial gossipers their news-room; village quidnics their barber's shop; the Chinese their opium-houses; American Indians their council-fire; and even cannibals their Noojona, or Talk-stone, where they assemble at times to discuss the affairs of the day" (363). Without discounting the obvious differences among these sites, Melville insists on their *functional* similarity: to provide a venue, a designated locale, for a "sociable chat" (363). This type of analogical thinking is precisely

what made *Asylums* such an original and controversial book, which aims, above all, to disclose parallels in what Bourdieu terms the "actual functioning" of disparate institutional sites—from "homes for the blind" and "TB sanitaria" to "concentration camps" and "colonial compounds" (4–5).

William Caudill criticized this aim in his 1962 review of *Asylums* for the *American Journal of Sociology*. Although "it is a good book, good mainly because of its clearness," he wrote, it "is muddied by the almost endless provocative descriptive comparisons of mental hospitals with jails, seedy boarding schools, poorly run ships, and so on." He meant to imply that Goffman had ignored a basic rule of scholarly writing: "A few sharp comparisons are fine; fifty piled one on top of the other serve to cloud the argument" (368). Is not such comparative or analogical excess also a trademark of Melville's work? As Otter puts it, *White-Jacket* "takes as its subject an entire set of analogies that links ship to shore," exemplifying Melville's broader tendency to proliferate and to anatomize like-nesses in his "voluminous effort to get inside his compatriot's heads" (50, 7). I suspect that this effort exerted a profound, if unconscious, influence on Goffman as he sought to get inside the head of the mental patient, to learn how the total institution "is subjectively experienced by him" (ix). Indeed, Melville is not merely a source of illustrative examples in *Asylums*; his presence is also felt, pervasively and palpably, in the analogical momentum of the argument. At its most Goffmanesque, in other words, *Asylums* is decidedly Melvillean.

3. Toward a New Sociology of Literature

This is ultimately to suggest that both the substance and the style of *Asylums* owe something to Melville, whose novel not only facilitates the production of sociological concepts ("secondary adjustment," "make-do," "stash," "free place") but also impacts the argumentative method through which those concepts emerge. Although it flouts the norms of literary criticism, Goffman's treatment of *White-Jacket* supplies a compelling example of how imaginative literature can partake in the construction of sociological knowledge. What, finally, does this example offer to literary studies? An initial answer is that Goffman provides a fresh way of thinking about *White-Jacket* as well as other works by Melville. By his light, the novel depicts an interaction order that is composed of both humans and nonhumans, foremost among them the narrator and his "hapless garment." Moreover, the sociologist reminds us that Melville was unusually sensitive to sociality and social typologies, and his selection and framing of passages from *White-Jacket* invites

us to reconsider the role of the nonhuman in Melville's sociological imagination. There are many ways to understand the artifacts, tools, habiliments, and other material objects that Melville portrays so memorably, but *Asylums* suggests that we should treat them as full participants in dramas of social interaction. They are, in this sense, what Latour calls actors.

Mediated by Goffman, then, Melville comes to look like an actor-network-theorist avant la lettre.[25] As *White-Jacket* details interactions within a well-defined site, the *Neversink,* it figures the social as a network of humans and nonhumans. Although there are pronounced differences among Melville, Goffman, and Latour, their writings share a central concern: the question of how material sites mediate sociality. Melville pursued this question when he set out "to give some idea of the interior life in a man of war." Latour and Goffman have examined it most thoroughly in their site-specific ethnographies. Goffman believed that Melville could help him answer this question because he understood imaginative literature to be a sociological resource. What if we were to follow his example? Something would be lost, to be sure, for Goffman's approach to Melville amounts to an unapologetic act of historical decontextualization—a process of abstracting and adapting quotes from *White-Jacket* to suit the exigencies of an argument that cares little about Melville himself, shows no interest in the society and culture of the antebellum United States, and refers to the "naval equivalent" in *White-Jacket* as though the navy had not changed since 1850. The audacity of *Asylums,* in other words, is its unhistoricism, which takes the form of an improbable conviction that a nineteenth-century novel about life aboard a naval vessel is pertinent to the study of the mid-twentieth-century psychiatric hospital. And yet, while we can identify problems with Goffman's approach, it nevertheless provides a valuable provocation at this moment, as we ponder new methods of reading and research, for it points to what Felski terms the "busy afterlife of the literary artifact," the way that "past texts have things to say on questions that matter to us" (580).

Rather than diligently tracking connections between *White-Jacket* and its moment, Goffman deployed the novel toward the construction of an original vocabulary for addressing a problem (the sociality of the total institution) that seemed urgent to him circa 1961. Surely literary criticism can draw inspiration from this model without junking its historicist commitments. We can examine the links between literary texts and their historical contexts while staying open to the ways that the literature of the past might enable us to think the present. And we can embrace Goffman's assumption that literature has much to teach us about social experience without relinquishing the interpretive labor that he himself avoids when he cites

Melville. Indeed, acknowledging the affinities between *Asylums* and *White-Jacket,* we might even consider literature a kind of microsociology—especially in cases where narratives dwell on the interaction orders of well-defined settings like the *Neversink*—so that literary interpretation becomes an act of apprehending sociality.[26] Although we know that the literary text is opaque and ambiguous, that it never constitutes a transparent report on actual social life, a new sociology *of* literature might nonetheless begin by recognizing the sociology *in* literature.[27] This, finally, would entail approaching literary authors as Goffman approached Melville: less as objects of analysis than as allies in the endeavor to grasp both the complexity of interaction and the mystery of collectivity.[28]

Notes

1. Goffman's use of literary sources points to the inter- or transdisciplinary character of his sociology, which Clifford Geertz (*Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* [1983]) took to exemplify the "enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life" (19). For an excellent account of Goffman's use of literary sources as well as his self-consciously literary writing style, see Greg Smith and Michael Hviid Jacobsen, "Goffman's Textuality: Literary Sensibilities and Sociological Rhetorics," *The Contemporary Goffman,* ed. Michael Hviid Jacobsen (2010), 119–47.

2. The flogging scenes are prominent in the reception history of *White-Jacket.* In *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), Margaret Cohen provides a recent example of how the novel has been understood by many critics: "Melville hammered home in this novel about life on a man-of-war that the navy is a brutal hierarchy ruled by force, flagrantly at odds with American ideals" (155).

3. To track precisely what Goffman read, I cite this edition throughout.

4. As this quote suggests, there are significant similarities between Goffman's project and Foucault's *Folie et déraison,* both published in 1961. For an incisive account of the link between these two thinkers, see Ian Hacking, "Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: Between Discourse in the Abstract and Face-to-Face Interaction," *Economy and Society* 33.3 (2004): 277–302.

5. See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1–21.

6. The scholarship on matter and materiality is vast and growing. A useful overview can be found in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialsims: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010). Also see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010); Graham Harman, *Towards a Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (2010); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (2012); and Daniel Miller, *Materiality (Politics, History, and Culture)* (2005).

7. See also Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006); Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of*

Description in the Eighteenth Century (2006); Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (2011); Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998). The problem of materiality also animates the proximate field of American material culture studies. For a cogent introduction to this field, which brings together literary critics, historians, and art historians, see Eric Slauter, "Craft and Objecthood," *Early American Literature* 39.2 (2004): 363–78. And for a stellar example of such scholarship, see Jennifer Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (2014).

8.   For a lucid analysis of the reception of *Laboratory Life,* see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999), ch. 3.

9.   See endnote 5.

10.   Adapting Greimas and Cortes's *Semiotics and Language,* Latour uses both *actant* and *actor* throughout his writings; see, for example, *Reassembling the Social* (54–55, 71). For a thorough explication of the term *actant* within narrative theory, see David Herman, "Existential Roots of Narrative Actants," *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 24.2 (2000): 257–71.

11.   Many critics have noted the attention that Melville gives to the materiality of the ship: F. O. Matthiessen (*American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [1941]) argues that this "heavily concrete" novel "comes near to being overweighted by the accumulation of circumstantial particulars" (412, 390); Howard P. Vincent (*The Tailoring of Melville's* White Jacket [1970]) contends, "The man-of-war with its anchors and rigging, its capstans and cannons, becomes the solid, central concern of the chapter, of the book—the ship as sheer fact" (25); Wai Chee Dimock points to "the ship's physical bulk" (80); and Samuel Otter claims that Melville "reserves his most vivid personifications for these inanimate features" (52).

12.   On Melville's time aboard the *United States,* see Willard Thorp's "Historical Note" in Melville's *White Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War*, vol. 5 of The Writings of Herman Melville (1970); and Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography: Volume 1, 1819–1851* (1996), 261–89.

13.   On refabrication, see Bill Brown, "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," *Critical Inquiry* 36.2 (2010): 183–217.

14.   The "miracle of collecting," Jean Baudrillard (*The System of Objects* [1968; 2005]) famously argued, is that "what you really collect is always your self" (97). Susan Stewart builds on this claim in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), 151–71.

15.   For a cogent analysis of *Typee*'s ethnographic elements, see Michael A. Elliott, "Other Times: Herman Melville, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Ethnographic Writing in the Antebellum United States," *Criticism* 49.4 (2007): 481–503.

16.   See Mizruchi for a brilliant analysis of Melville's use of types as well as a more general account of typological thinking within both literature and sociology during the period.

17.   To the body of critical commentary on the flogging scenes, though, I would add that Melville's figuration of "the lash" squares with Elaine Scarry's

understanding of the weapon in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985).

18.   Many scholars have examined the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg. Recently, following in the wake of critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Leo Bersani, Birgit Brander Rasmussen (*Queequeg's Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature* [2012]) has analyzed "the imagery of marriage in Queequeg's and Ishmael's first meeting."

19.   Here I echo anthropologist Timothy J. Shannon, who argues that "these shared smokes" help to foster "an easy intimacy between the two" (590). His argument provides an impressive account of the actual artifact, the peculiar sort of pipe tomahawk, to which Melville's descriptions refer. See "Queequeg's Tomahawk: A Cultural Biography, 1750–1900," *Ethnohistory* 52.3 (2005): 589–633.

20.   "[W]e remained in New York," wrote Elizabeth Melville in her journal in the summer of 1849; "he wrote 'Redburn' & 'White Jacket'" (*Log* 309). For the full composition history of these two novels, see Delbanco, Parker, and the Northwestern-Newberry editions of each.

21.   See Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (2001).

22.   See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), 317–327; Otter, 217–18.

23.   The first quote appears in Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891* (1969), 309; the second in Parker, *Herman Melville,* 787–88.

24.   Casarino formulates this point in a slightly different way when he asks: "[A]re all the relations and practices aboard the ship being referred to as a world, that is, as some kind of self-contained totality? Or, is it the world ashore that is seen here inside the ship, is it only in the ship that the world materializes as 'The World' and that it can be represented as a world at all?" (29).

25.   T. Hugh Crawford makes a similar claim when he deploys ANT to apprehend the nonhuman entities in *Moby-Dick*. He argues: "To read Melville's novel solely as a study of human action—mania, passion, or equanimity—is to ignore much of the text. . . . The action of the novel requires Ahab and Ishmael, but it also needs accurate compasses and manila whaling lines" (3). See "Networking the (Non)Human: Moby-Dick, Matthew Fontaine Maury, and Bruno Latour," *Configurations* 5.1 (1997): 1–21.

26.   I owe this formulation to Love.

27.   For an overview of what have come to be known as "new sociologies of literature," see James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After 'the Sociology of Literature,'" *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): v-xxiii.

28.   For a lively and productive discussion of this argument, I am grateful to the participants in the seminar on "New Sociologies of Literature" at the 2013 American Comparative Literature Association Conference. In addition, I am indebted to

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