A Bitter Poetics of Differentiation

Cultural Evolution in the Verse of John Wesley Powell

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Abstract

The famed explorer, scientist, and U.S. government administrator John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) was a significant contributor to cultural evolutionary thinking in the late-nineteenth century. In addition to scientific publications, he also—curiously—used the genre of poetry as an outlet for his ideas. This article analyzes two of Powell's obscure published poems. I argue that his poetry is significant, not for its literary value, but for what it reveals about theories of cultural evolution that were operative for a significant U.S. government agent who played a critical role in the production of knowledge about Native American religions. This article contributes to the theme of political theology and settler colonialism by examining the ideological features of settler colonialism—the production of ideas, knowledge, and theories that have supported and justified U.S. settler colonialism. I demonstrate that there was an aesthetic as well as a scientific register to racialized cultural evolutionary thinking.

Keywords: cultural evolution, John Wesley Powell, anthropology, settler colonialism, racial science, Indigenous religion, Native American religion

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Introduction[1]

> The Will as engineer, with might sublime—
> The twin of mind combined by miracle—
> Is fain to join in great Creator's work
> And lend his aid to task of building world.
> And, trained by Mind in laws of primal time,
> That guide the course of evolution vast,
> Volition makes a better world for man,
> Conforming still to universal plan[2]

These words, penned by the famed explorer and scientist John Wesley Powell (1834-1902), appeared at the end of his poem entitled "The Soul." Published in 1895 in the philosophical journal *The Monist*, the poem outlines Powell's fantastical vision of the evolution of the human soul. A U.S. government administrator and prominent "man of science," Powell was an influential thinker in his day. He published dozens of scientific writings addressing the theory of evolution and its applications for understanding human history and society. Powell also—curiously—employed the genre of poetry as an outlet for his ideas about evolution. Over the course of sixteen pages, "The Soul" explores ideas about humankind's primeval past and the powers of the mind and will. In addition, the poem offers a romantic vision of the relationship between individuals, their ancestors, and their place within society and the wider world. While Powell's poetry may seem benign, it reifies the culturally supremacist idea that humans advance along a single trajectory of cultural progress. Ultimately, through verse, Powell suggested that there is one cosmic plan to which all humans are subject, and in their highest evolved states, they seek one universal truth. This grand narrative left no room for alternative forms of human cultural development. In celebrating the triumph of one single human trajectory, Powell's poetry rejected the possibility that many valid worldviews and cultural practices might exist.

"The Soul" is significant not for its literary value, but for what it reveals about the art and science of racialization in a critical era of U.S. settler colonialism. Powell played a key role in the professionalization of American anthropology and the advancement of scholarship on Native American cultures. While he produced numerous scientific works on cultural evolution, his poetry added another dimension to his oeuvre. Adopting the genre of poetry enabled Powell to express his ideas in a more stylistic manner, drawing on spiritual imagery to discuss biological processes. It also enabled Powell to *model* one of the arguments found in his scientific works: that "civilized" cultures produce "higher" art forms. Powell's creative works thus represent the aesthetic and theological dimensions of his wide-ranging theory of cultural evolution.

Powell's poetry furthers what I term a *poetics of differentiation*, an artistic or literary rendering of the racialized idea of cultural evolution that was common in the late-nineteenth century. Fundamentally, *poetics* refers to the craft of writing poetry and to the study of this craft. It can also be used in a more general sense as the study of the formal techniques used in literary works beyond poetry. And, in the most expansive understanding of the term, *poetics* can serve "as a label for any formal or informal survey of the structures, devices, and norms that enable a discourse, genre, or cultural system to produce particular effects."[3] In this essay, I am likewise employing the phrase *poetics of differentiation* in multiple ways. In what follows, I examine the formal characteristics in Powell's poetry as well as features of his wider body of published work. While *poetics*—the study of form—is often contrasted with *hermeneutics*—the interpretation of meaning—it is difficult to disentangle form from meaning when analyzing Powell's poetry. For Powell himself, form *conveyed* meaning. He believed that the formal characteristics of literary and artistic works reflected the author or artist's level of cultural development. Powell's scientific works repeatedly emphasized his belief in racialized cultural difference, and that trend

carried over to his poetic works. Transmuting scientific theories into expressive verse, Powell's poetry represents one small yet noteworthy piece of his larger scholarly project to delineate cultural difference along racialized lines.

In addition to "The Soul," a second poem, "Becoming," was posthumously published by *The Monist* in 1911. The preface of this latter poem explicitly stated that it described evolution. In "Becoming," Powell compared the process of evolution to the growth of a tree, suggesting that humans must strive toward truth. But not all would be able to reach it. The poem suggested that those who are "unfit," who do not measure up to his highest envisioned ideals, would be "to death consigned."[4] Powell's poems can thus be interpreted as furthering an exclusive vision of human progress, one that privileged only the most "evolved."

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This essay contributes to understandings of political theology and settler colonialism by examining the ideological features of imperialism—the production of ideas, knowledge, and theories that have supported and justified U.S. settler colonialism. Powell composed "The Soul" during what is known as the "Assimilation Era" in U.S. Federal Indian policy. During this era, the U.S. government sought to constrain and curtail traditional Native American spiritual and cultural practices. Enacted through law, administered by non-Native agents on reservations, enforced by Christian missionaries, and championed by so-called "Friends of the Indian," assimilation policies demanded that Native peoples give up their ways of life.[5] Indigenous spokespersons and scholars of Native American and Indigenous studies have described U.S. federal Indian assimilation policies as a form of cultural genocide.[6] Overt racialization or prejudice is absent from Powell's poetry, which offers a romantic conceptualization of human progress. Yet his poetic visions nonetheless advanced ideas that were central to racialized

theories of cultural evolution: that a superior human form had evolved over time, that it was superior due to its innate mental abilities, and that science could reveal the truth of this claim.

Powell's two published poems, heretofore unexplored, offer a unique window into his ideas about cultural evolution. In my analysis of his poetry, I highlight six formal elements that comprise Powell's *poetics of differentiation*. First, the *themes* of his poems centered around biological, geological, and human progress. He employed a *narrative structure* that proceeded chronologically, corresponding with this theme of progress. The primary *literary devices* Powell used were *allegory* and *trope*, which he regarded as the poetic forms utilized only within the most civilized cultures. Powell's poetry featured explicitly spiritual *imagery* and *symbolism*, painting elaborate pictures of celestial realms. The spiritual imagery symbolized the highest state of culture—the civilized state—as the heavenly domain of human willpower.

Indigenous and cultural studies scholars have explored the ways scientific thought has played a role in the settler colonial governance of Indigenous and racialized populations.[7] Scholars of literature have written about the power of creative works to normalize imperial projects.[8] My analysis of Powell's publications shows how he drew on both approaches in his work. In his professional lectures and writings, he used scientific logic to support his position on the "law" of cultural evolution; in his poetry, he used expressive techniques—drawing on emotion rather than logic—to the same effect. When read together with his scientific works, which more explicitly touted the superiority of Euro-American religions and cultures, Powell's poetry reveals an intensely held belief in a singular process of cultural advancement, culminating in pure knowledge that he believed to be exclusive to the most advanced civilizations. While Powell's poems were not explicitly racialized, they were based on racialized theories of cultural development that Powell widely shared in public talks and written works. My examination of

Powell's poetry demonstrates that he used expressive, emotional forms—and explicitly spiritual language—to augment and reinforce his "scientifically" based, culturally supremacist theory of human progress.

Power and the Production of Knowledge

Major John Wesley Powell was a leading thinker in his day and was actively engaged in many scientific disciplines in the United States. After serving prominently in the Civil War, he gained national fame with his expeditions of the Colorado River and Grand Canyon between 1869 and 1872. A geographer, geologist, and ethnologist, he was influential in numerous professional societies. Powell was a founder, incorporator, and/or leader of the Anthropological Society of Washington, American Anthropological Association, Washington Academy of Sciences, National Geographic Society, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He also was a member of the National Academy of Sciences; the Biological, Chemical, Physical, and Geological Societies of Washington; the Geological Society of America; and the American Folklore Society. In addition, outside of the United States, he was a member of scientific associations in France and Germany.[9] The U.S. government employed Powell as the director of the U.S. Geographical and Geological Survey from 1881 to 1894. He also served as the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology from 1879 until his death in 1902. Powell was a prolific speaker and writer, regularly presenting before professional societies and publishing approximately 350 writings in government, professional, and popular outlets.[10]

Most scholarly and popular attention on Powell has focused on his geographical and geological surveys throughout the West. Among general audiences, he is renowned as an explorer who traversed dangerous routes through the American West and Southwest in search of knowledge. He is most famous for his 1869 expedition of the Colorado River, the first recorded

instance of a Euro-American making the journey. The story of this expedition has captured the attention of audiences from Powell's day to the current era. Powell's own accounts were published serially in *Scribner's Monthly* in the years following the expedition, and the Smithsonian first published Powell's account of the expedition as a single volume in 1875 as the *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and its Tributaries*. Numerous books for popular audiences have documented his explorations.[11] Powell has thus held a commanding status as a scientist-explorer who helped to "discover" parts of the American West that were previously unknown to Euro-Americans. This situates him as an actor in what would become mythic narratives about the American frontier, fueled by earlier notions of manifest destiny. As Dakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has argued, settler colonial stories of discovery and exploration presented the West as home to "wild" lands and peoples that Euro-Americans were destined to conquer and replace.[12] Powell's expeditions, and his own storytelling about them, contributed to this mythology.

Less attention has been paid to Powell's role in the development of American anthropology.[13] In addition to his involvement in the "second opening the West," he played a critical role in the expansion of scholarly knowledge about Native American cultures. Powell was the director of the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), a Smithsonian agency that studied Indigenous communities in North America, from its inception in 1879 until his death in 1902. The BAE was a significant contributor to the development of American anthropology.[14] BAE employees initiated and undertook anthropological research among dozens of Native American nations. As its leader, Powell directed the agency's resources, oversaw research projects, and edited a wide array of publications. He thus played a critical role in the federal production of knowledge about Native American cultures and religions. At the same time, he was a proponent

of the very U.S. federal Indian assimilation policies that targeted Native traditions. In his own writings produced during his tenure at the BAE, and in summarizing the work of Bureau employees and contributors, Powell used the agency's data to support his theory of cultural evolution.[15] This theory drew on scientific techniques to argue that there were inherent racial and cultural differences among human groups, as well as a natural hierarchy ordering these groups.

Powell's scientific writings explicitly touted the superiority of Euro-American cultural forms. Hallmark to the brand of cultural evolution discussed in his scientific works was the idea that all societies passed through stages progressing from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization"—all technical terms that were circulated in scientific literature of the day. Powell drew heavily on and extended the work of the influential American thinker Lewis Henry Morgan, who outlined these stages of cultural evolution in his 1877 book *Ancient Society*.[16] Powell's own work described the supposed superiority of "civilized" societies, cultures, languages, and traditions. Science, Powell believed, could reveal the objective reality of these cultural hierarchies. Similarly, Powell's poems celebrated the most "evolved" ideas and cultural forms that he believed would inevitably prevail at the expense of others. Scientific research suggesting that Native American cultures were "savage" or "barbaric" justified the U.S. government's extensive efforts to "elevate" Native nations through cultural assimilation policies.[17]

Classifying Evolutionary Forms

"The story of human evolution," Powell argued, "is the essence of the history of mankind."[18] Many of Powell's scientific writings drew on and contributed to the theory of evolution and explored its applications to humankind. His attention to this topic was not unique. The theme of evolution, and its utility in understanding human culture and society,

revolutionized scientific disciplines in the nineteenth century. Even before Charles Darwin published his theories about evolution and natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), earlier scholars such as Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), William Paley (1743-1805), and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) had written about biological species and heredity. While some scientific responses to Darwin's in the nineteenth century was negative, many scientists in Europe and the United States responded positively to his work. The American botanist Asa Gray, for example, fiercely defended Darwin's theories. Regardless of their perspectives, scientists were forced to reckon with evolutionary thought. In his work on contemporary theories of cultural evolution as they pertain to the study of religion, Radek Kundt describes a "generalized Darwinism" that was popular in the nineteenth century, in which many scientific thinkers took basic ideas about evolutionary change and indiscriminately applied them to numerous contexts outside the biological world.[19] Perhaps the most insidious example of this loose application of Darwin's theories was "social Darwinism," a theory that naturalized social inequalities.

Darwin's theory of natural selection was primarily meant to account for diversity among living things, with animals and plants initially offering evidence. But Powell, like other scientists, used Darwin's ideas to explain facets of life to which Darwin did not intend for his theories to apply. Powell furthered a theory of evolution that accounted for change among three different domains. First was "biotic evolution," which corresponded with Darwin's area of focus. This involved the series of gradual changes in living things that occur via natural selection. Powell then took the theory of evolution further, using it to explain two very different phenomena: geological processes, physical changes that have occurred on the earth over time, and cultural change among humans, or what he termed the "anthropic kingdom."[20]

Powell's posthumously published poem "Belonging" offers a poetic rendering of these different types of evolution, with a particular emphasis on geological "evolution" and its correspondence to "biotic" natural selection. The poem begins with an editor's note: "Intimate friends of the late Major John Wesley Powell know that he was not only an anthropologist of high standing, an organizer and a born executive, a chief, educator, and a reformer… but that he was also a poet." The editor explicitly states that the poem is about evolution; indeed, the poem uses allegory to describe differences between the forms of evolution he had discussed in his scientific works.

"Becoming" presents an idyllic natural scene: an island that is home to a tree that holds a robin's nest. These three symbols—island, tree, and bird—serve as metaphors for different forms of natural change and heredity. This poem focuses in particular on Powell's theories of geological change and "biotic" evolution. "Becoming" begins with an "old riddle":

> In marble walls as white as milk,
> All lined with skin as soft as silk,
> A golden apple doth appear,
> In ambient bath of crystal clear.
> There are not portals to behold,
> Yet thieves break in and steal the gold.[21]

This riddle refers to an egg, which symbolizes the process of birth and the beginning of a new generation. After this opening riddle, Powell's poem includes a "song" section, a technique also found in "The Soul." This section sets up the poem by briefly introducing his three symbols, "the island of beauty," a "glorious oak on the island," and the "musical robin of greenwood" (398-9). As the narrative structure of the poem proceeds, Powell cycles through increasingly more figurative treatments of his symbols. In three short sections of two stanzas each, he offers an overview of his three symbols and how they each come into being. First, the poem describes the development of an island:

> The island germ is fed by every rain
> That falls among the hills where rivers run;
> More sands from year to year and age to age
> Come down with rains that fall from roaring storms
> That ever ride on air from sea to land,
> Until through waves there bursts an island grand.[22]

He then discusses how the oak tree grows over time:

> A treelet bourgeons from the acorn's heart,
> Which penetrates the earth with hungry roots
> And stretches arms to reach vivific light,
> Its leaves in love with day, its roots with night.[23]

Finally, he describes the robin's emergence from the egg that began the poem:

> An egg with turkis spots a robin holds:
> The germ, sequestered safe in marble walls,
> Is warmed to life by mother's tender care,
> Who gathers crumbs from cottage tables cast
> And fruit form meadow, copse, and forest tree…
>
> On welcome store of food the birdlet grows,
> Evolving fingered feet with clasping skill
> To perch upon the blossom-bearing bough…"[24]

Of particular note in this final excerpt is Powell's use of the term "evolution" in a more generalized sense to refer to the growth of a single bird's limbs as it ages. In this example, and in each of the stanzas that make up this section, Powell emphasizes the individual development of the island, tree, and bird. But his ultimate goal is to extend this chronicle of growth and development beyond the individual examples, which Powell turns to in the following section, entitled "The Lesson." In it, he beckons to his subjects:

> O, beautifule isle, O, glorious tree
> O, musical bird, teach wisdom to me![25]

Because, for Powell, they each represent a larger narrative of "wondrous transformation" over the course of time. Powell points to the larger forces of change that each of his symbols are subject to in the following sections, "The Coming of Islands," "The Coming of Trees," and "The

Coming of Birds." In his poetic account of the "evolution" of landforms, for example, he discusses the geological changes that occur over long periods of time:

> The isle that gems the shore shall mainland be
> And tide-swept bank shall mountain summit crown,
> Plateau shall be submerged as ocean floor,
> And lofty peak beneath the deep sea sink,
> In sure obedience to cosmic force
> As alternating generations come,
> When land to sea and sea to land gives birth,
> Evolving continental forms of earth.

In this stanza, Powell equates geological change to the process of giving birth, and presents it as akin to the passing of generations in the animal kingdom**.** These changes, the poem suggests, are subject to a "cosmic force," a natural process imbued with spiritual significance. In drawing similarities between geological change and the reproductive processes of animals, Powell appears to justify his use of the term "evolution" to describe phenomena in a way that Darwin did not intend. However, his stanzas on the "biotic" evolution of trees and birds is more in line with accepted understandings of this process, drawing on Darwin's theories of natural selection. The poem relates how,

> In long procession through the æons come
> The arborescent generations vast
> Evolving with the many forms of land…
> Till earth is clothed with multitudinous forms...[26]

and

> …tribes of birds adown the ages come,
> In generations numbered like the years,
> With fitting kind for every habitat…[27]

Ultimately, the metaphors for change over time in "Becoming" mirror ideas about evolution that Powell described in his scientific talks and writings. Powell subscribed to Darwin's theories of natural evolution to account for the evolution of animal and plant life, but he also sought to apply the theory to the realm of geological change. While subsequent thinkers generally would not

apply the theory in this way, Powell used the genre of poetry to intimate that geologic change was subject to the law of evolution.

Human Evolution via the "Course of Culture"

While "Becoming" primarily highlights Powell's conceptions of geological and "biotic" evolution, his poem "The Soul" explicates the third category of evolution to which Powell subscribed, human cultural evolution. In it, Powell offers a poetic contribution to the debate about social and cultural evolution, which he discussed extensively throughout his professional career. Some scientific thinkers in the nineteenth century applied the theory of evolution to society, resulting in the now-discredited concept of "social Darwinism." The idea of "social Darwinism" grew out of thinkers' application of the theory of natural selection to the realm of society, suggesting that those who had wealth, power, and good standing in society were deserving of their good fortunes, and those who were marginalized in society deserved to be neglected.[28] Powell did not agree with this idea. When discussing social Darwinism, Powell argued that "no error in philosophy could be more disastrous."[29] He believed a civilized society should take care of all its citizens. In his discussion of evolution, he proposed an idea that falls outside the theory of natural evolution that is central to Darwin's theory. While competition exists among the realm of plants and animals, humans "bypassed the stage when [they] had to compete with them for existence… to that extent the law of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence was annulled in its application" to humankind.[30] For Powell, change among humankind occurred not via natural selection, a passive process, but via an active process of cultural development.

In an 1888 essay published in the first volume of the journal *American Anthropologist*, based on his Anthropological Society of Washington presidential address, Powell described the

role of competition in human evolution. Drawing on Darwin's ideas about natural selection, Powell provided an overview of the concept of "survival of the fittest." He noted that many scientists believed that this concept could be applied to humankind. Powell, however, argued that human cultural change was *not* governed by the process of natural selection that led to the development of animal and plant life and ultimately gave rise to humans.[31] Because humans had reached a particular level of evolution, human culture and society was not subject to the same laws of evolution that dictate the development of the "biotic" sphere. He argued instead that the process of human evolution is accomplished actively as people develop new tools, arts, industries, and social structures to continuously better society. "Human evolution arises out of the endeavor to secure happiness: it is a conscious effort for improvement in condition."[32] Thus, it is an active process, described in "The Soul" as the development of wisdom over time.

However, even while Powell disagreed that "the survival of the fittest" applied to human culture, he *did* argue that a form of evolution existed among humanity. "Human evolution," Powell contended, "does not result in the differentiation of kinds of animal men, but in stages of intellectual growth."[33] He argued that there are distinct differences between change among "lower animals" versus change among humans. Through the processes of natural selection, animals are passively adapted to their environments. However, for humans, the process of evolution occurs when they actively adapt themselves to their environments. Culture was the primary indicator of humans' adaptation. Thus, for Powell, "the study of human evolution is resolved into the study of culture."[34]

Ultimately, Powell believed that human societies developed from stages of savagery to barbarism to civilization. This "course of culture"—which he held as natural and inevitable—was "the evolution of the humanities."[35] Powell analyzed different categories of the humanities

within culture: arts, institutions, languages, opinions, and "intellections." He broke down each of these broad categories into further sub-categories. Within fine arts, for example, Powell listed five classes: music, graphics (including sculpture and painting), drama, story, and poetry.[36] Among each of these facets of human aesthetic production, Powell argued that there were different stages that human cultural groups advanced through on their ways savagery to barbarism to civilization (and sometimes, to a final stage beyond that, which he termed "republickism"). Each stage of cultural development produced particular aesthetic forms. In drama, for example, Powell argued that there was a progression through the stages of drama from dance (characteristic of the savage stage), to sacrifice (characteristic of the barbaric stage), to ceremony (characteristic of the civilized stage). The final culmination of drama in the cultural stage of republickism was drama as "histrionic art," or play-acting.[37]

Powell held that these ideas also applied to poetry. He argued that this art form progressed from personification (characteristic of the savage stage), to similitude (characteristic of the barbaric stage), to allegory (characteristic of the civilized stage), and finally to trope (characteristic of the "republickan" stage).[38] And, in his own poems, he conspicuously employed the techniques that he associated with the most highly evolved forms of poetry: allegory and trope. In an assessment of fine arts, Powell explained that "poetry represents psychic pictures by metaphor, through the aid of rhythmic literature, sometimes using rhyme and alliteration."[39] His own poetry followed these conventions. But what purpose could he have had for writing poetry concerning ideas that he extensively covered in scientific writings? Poetry, he argued, had another purpose to fulfill: "to reach the intellect through symbols, and thus kindle the emotions." Poetry, along with other art forms, was necessarily "symbolic and emotional."[40] And Powell's poem "The Soul," very much so. Drawing on six primary literary devices—themes, narrative

structure, symbolism, imagery, allegory, and trope—he presented his theory of cultural evolution in an expressive form. This *poetics of differentiation* reinforced many of the ideas in Powell's scientific works, cloaking them in spiritual imagery in order to "reach the intellect" through non-scientific means.

"The Soul" both narrates and instantiates Powell's ideas about the evolution of culture, contributing to his *poetics of differentiation* through the ideas it furthered as well as its form. Published in *The Monist* in 1895, it is a sprawling, sixteen-page poem. It contains four main sections that describe the nature of the human soul in expressive language. First, an allegorical section provides an overview of Powell's theory of the evolution of the human soul. Second, a descriptive section uses romantic terms to describe the wonders of the natural world, before describing humanity's place within it—or above it. A short section then describes different features of the human soul. Finally, he describes the ultimate, most evolved aspects of the soul: its manifestation in the human mind and the human will. Each section is a puzzle piece containing one part of Powell's grand conception about the nature of the soul. The poem concludes with a short section, "Becoming of Soul," that synthesizes his theory. Ultimately, the poem narrates a process in which humans transcend the world and bend it to their will, taking "evolution" into their own hands.

Powell's poem begins with a section entitled "Allegory," employing the literary device of the same name, which uses a story as a metaphor to offer some sort of deeper meaning. It is noteworthy that this technique is indicative of "civilized" poetry in Powell's scientific writings on the progress of cultural forms, and that he uses it to illustrate his idea about the processes of evolution, reproduction, and heredity. Powell describes the soul, first, as the "primal property in sentient life," a feature that is an essential aspect of humanity and that which distinguishes it

from other forms of life.[41] But more than that, according to Powell, the human soul is something that develops collectively over time. Powell illustrates this development through a story in which a variety of mythical creatures reproduce, giving birth over generations to increasingly more knowledgeable and powerful beings. The process begins when

> Heredity, the gift of life in plant
> By which the past descends to present time,
> Is wed in love with young Awareness fair,
> And from the source of life an issue springs
> Of troops of memories, on angel wings.[42]

These memories proliferate, and over time give rise to "fays of sense." Eventually, as new generations continue to come into being, gaining more knowledge and experiencing more sensations, these fays of perceptions give rise to "A host of fairies of a higher life / Who ride on thoughts through world of peace and strife.[43] These fairies are distinguished from the presumably less developed fays by the higher level of thought they are capable of achieving based on their earlier collective knowledge. While he does not explicitly indicate that he's referring to humans, this allegorical portrayal of what is essentially the sexual reproduction of fairies does seem to serve as a metaphor for human procreation. Indeed, his scientific writings on cultural evolution, Powell argued that as humans progressed over time, they gained more wisdom and insight.

As the poem continues, Powell imbues the process of gaining knowledge over time with spiritual value, connecting intellectual and religious virtue**.** The allegory continues when metaphorical perceptions continue to multiply "of world's activity and deeds of self," the "sacred bonds of thought" develop in holy wedlock. Out of this union springs forth

> giants armed with force and energy,
> In panoply of universal laws
> And coursing steeds of universal cause.[44]

These giants are distinguished by their superior force, energy, and knowledge. While the earlier fays "[sailed] on perfume o'er the sea of cloud," these giants enter on powerful coursing steeds of universal knowledge.[45] Their power is tied to their superior intellectual capacity, which both builds on and extends beyond the knowledge of previous fantastical beings that preceded the giants.

In his scientific writings on evolution, one important element Powell highlighted was his belief that all human social life moves from disorder and disarray toward standardization, systematization, and unification. He shared these ideas in his annual address as the president of the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1883, which was later published in the society's transactions. Powell suggested that "the philosophies of civilized peoples are highly unified; that as we go backward in their history they become more diverse; And finally, when we study the earliest philosophies, together with the philosophies of the lowest tribes of mankind, we discover that there is a vast multiplicity of systems of opinions."[46] He made a similar argument regarding the nature of language: "Language springs from innumerable centers, and, in general, progress has been toward unification. As the centuries of human endeavor have passed languages have become fewer in number and more persons have spoken the same language."[47] Ultimately, Powell believed that human life will eventually converge in one single, superior form.

This idea about progressive movement toward intellectual and spiritual unity holds true in the allegorical section of his poem "The Soul." At the end of the section,

> The giants wed and genii appear—
> Reflexions wise that ken the past and now—
> And prophesy the history of world,
> Emblazoned on the tome of present time:
> A light to read the ages coming on,
> The tale of time in glyphs of æons gone.[48]

Over generations, fays give rise to fairies, who eventually give rise to giants. These giants wed and produce "genii," beings representing the ultimate pinnacle of knowledge and power. "Genii" can be used as the plural form of both genie and genius. In line with Powell's discussion of minor fantastical creatures—the fays and fairies—eventually developing into stronger forms of fantastical creatures, it is reasonable to surmise that Powell seeks to gesture to genies, powerful guardian spirits who have immense knowledge. But, in addition to this, as the reproductive processes that Powell describes is tethered so closely to the development of knowledge and insight, he likely seeks to evoke the idea of genius as well. These genii are wise and can understand the past as it is "emblazoned on the tome of present time." They are endowed with "a light to read the ages coming on."[49] These are the great beings that according to Powell's poem have strength, knowledge, and power. With their ability to understand the past and peer into the future, they symbolize the pinnacle of the human soul as an agent of wisdom.[50]

This poetic section on the development of the soul reflects a key aspect of Powell's notion of cultural evolution that he highlighted in his scientific writings: the steady progress governing the development of knowledge. In an address he gave at the 1882 Darwin Memorial Meeting, hosted by the Biological Society of Washington, Powell considered the influence of Darwin's ideas on philosophy. Powell offered an expansive definition of philosophy as "the explanation of the phenomena of the universe."[51] He argued that there are three progressive categories of philosophy: mythologic, metaphysic, and scientific. "In the lower stages of society" Powell argued, "philosophy is purely mythologic. All savage and barbaric peoples explain the phenomena of the universe by a system of myths."[52] Powell summarily dismissed metaphysic philosophy, what he viewed as the next stage in the development of philosophy, before turning to scientific philosophy. The purpose of this third philosophical category, he argued, was to

"discover the order of succession of phenomena—how phenomena follow phenomena in endless procession, how every fact has had its antecedent fact, and every fact must have its consequent fact."[53] This he equated with "evolution." Science, for Powell, was the highest form of philosophy, a system enabling humans to discover important truths. He argued that "the revelation of science is this: Every generation in life is a step in progress to a higher and fuller life."[54] Progress and change, he believed, was inherently good. As the "The Soul" progresses, this idea emerges.

The Spiritual Supremacy of Science

After his allegorical depiction of human evolution, the subsequent section of "The Soul" describes humanity's place within the wider world. A romantic ode to the wonders of life, it also contains a significant pronouncement: humans are not just part of nature, but in their highest forms are capable of triumphing over it. Powell describes wondrous physical phenomena from the heavens to the earth, to the waters driving down underneath the ground. He celebrates "a world of life beneath the azure dome— / The star-decked tent for every wanderer's home." Later, the poem describes how "forest clothes the mountain with delight, / And prairie blooms in beatific sight."[55] The poem romanticizes plants and creatures in glowing, florid terms. The romantic content, form, and verbiage of this section echo works by creative writers of the era who incorporated facets of science and nature into their novels, short stories, essays, and poetry.[56]

Powell's romantic descriptions also embedded a message about the nature of the wider world: the role it plays for humanity. Powell believed that nature is not merely beautiful or valuable of and for itself, however—its purpose is to offer intellectual benefits to humanity. Features of the natural world "live to signal to man / And play their part in psychic plan."[57]

Powell suggests that the ultimate purpose of the natural world is to exist for humans to encounter and interpret. When people experience environments, they when create "living words," making sense of their experiences. Through the "magical art" of conversations and writing, humans create their own environments.[58] Powell describes humans themselves as creators. This is in line with his argument, in scientific works, that humans may have sprung from the environment, but they have grown beyond it and are in a position of power over it—the power to interpret it, and the power to bend it to their will. Guided by the wisdom they gain over time and from interactions with the environment, humans play active roles their own evolution. As he wrote in an article on the evolution of religion, once culture reaches its highest form, "the powers of nature are enslaved."[59]

The next section of "The Soul" explores another aspect of humanity's relationship to the environment: the soul's purpose of "[coping] with forces of the earth!"[60] This section consists of short stanzas, each with their own heading; they include Awareness, Memory, Sensation, Perception, Understanding, Reflexion [sic], Acception [sic], Introspection, and Conception.[61] In each stanza, a grandiose metaphor reveals an inner feature of the soul that is connected in some way with an individual's experience of the wider world. In the stanza on Awareness, for example, Powell writes: "The soul is a harp on which the cosmos plays," reacting to the positive and negative things that occur that humans might encounter.[62] In the stanza on Perception, he writes that "the soul is skilled interpreter of world / To render into thought the signs unfurled."[63] This reinforces Powell's contention that nature is full of signs for humanity to interpret. In the stanza on Understanding, he suggests that "the soul is a wise discoverer of cause / Who sees revealed in form the guiding laws."[64] While he doesn't specify in the poem the nature of these

laws, this idea reinforces Powell's scientific writings arguing that humans follow along one universal path.

For Powell, the human soul gives rise to the spiritual power of wisdom. Later sections of the poem illustrate the religious significance that he places on human knowledge. In a stanza entitled "Acception,"

> The soul is temple built of spoken blocks;
> Its deep foundation laid in living rocks;
> Its walls combine experiental lore,
> As thought and thought are hewn forevermore.
> The dome is of reason of heavenly hue,
> On arches that symbol the good and the true.
> Pavilions stand to guard them all,
> And wisdom glints the turrets tall. [65]

"The soul," he suggests, "is temple built of spoken blocks," with the "living rocks" of life as its foundation. The walls of this temple of the soul are built out of experience and thought. The soul is further guarded by pavilions with turrets of wisdom. This is a noteworthy stanza, drawing on spiritual language to describe a temple of wisdom. Considered in light of Powell's scientific writings, it takes on a deeper meaning. In his writings on Native American religious traditions, Powell contended that ceremonies and traditions were reflective of savage and barbaric stages of cultural evolution, and were grounded in superstition and misguided logic. He believed the most advanced form religion could take was as an ethical system, guided by wisdom.[66] In using spiritual terms to describe wisdom, Powell subtly upheld the religious hierarchy he outlined in his scientific works, presenting the highest "religion" as one that was guided by the same logic found in scientific thought.

The next two, final stanzas go on to describe what Powell believes are two constitutive features of the soul: the mind and the will. The mind, in Powell's poem, is "Architect with cosmic force / to gather all from its primeval source." He locates emotion within the mind, and

likens it to the "judgment experience brings," indebted to wisdom through an individual's experience with "ancestral heritage" to "guard the way." The will, Powell writes, is more active. It is "Engineer, with might sublime / To yoke the energies of space and time." The will is what helps individuals to respond when "world collides with self."[67] This reinforces what Powell had argued in a scientific article that the "power to reach inductive conclusions in opposition to current and constant sensuous perceptions is the greatest acquisition of civilized culture."[68] This is in contrast to the forms of knowledge that define savage and barbaric cultures.

In the final section of the poem, "Becoming of Soul," Powell weaves together ideas he outlined at previous points in the poem. He describes "universal lore" that all of humanity collectively deposits into its memory. The question of the relationship between the individual and the community is interesting here. In the later poem, "becoming" is in part a reference to the process of evolution. Whatever the soul interprets "[conforms] just to universal norm."[69] Powell describes how, through the process of Understanding, people can read "symbol-forms," likely meaning written words, and turn those into "living blocks of energy," concepts that are

> wise of universal force,
> The elements of soul in psychic mode
> Obedient to laws of cosmic code."[70]

Here we have a sense of Powell's own ideas about the nature of the cosmos. Ultimately, Powell writes, the human will

> "Is fain to join in great Creator's work
> And lend his aid to task of building world.
> And, trained by Mind in laws of primal time,
> That guide the course of evolution vast,
> Volition makes a better world for man / Conforming still to universal plan."[71]

In other words, the human will is compelled to join in a sacred act of world-building, drawing on earlier forms of knowledge and reaching toward a single unified plan. Volition, the process of using one's own will, is a crowning aspect of the human soul for Powell. This drive—drawing on

one's ideas and experiences, which are built on the wisdom of earlier times—is the highest achievement of the human soul for Powell. Striking is the idea that there is a universal plan to which everyone conforms. Powell contrasts this ideal soul type who gazes far "out to cosmic realm" with one who gazes "into gloom of introverted self."[72] While the poem itself does not offer examples of thinking that do not live up to these ideals, Powell's book *Truth and Error* systematically outlines his ideas about natural categories and the supposed fallacies of cultures that have not been able to develop what he believed were the most sophisticated ways of thinking about the world, including Native North Americans.[73]

Powell used poetry to represent humanity as the master of nature, striving toward universal scientific laws. In his posthumously published poem "Becoming," he wrote:

> The wise man goes beyond the seeming thing…
> …he learns
> That the new creation which the prophets saw
> Is cryptic growth of universal law."[74]

This sentiment is present in Powell's scientific writings, in which he argued that "The greatest intellectual achievement of civilization was the discovery of the physical explanation of the powers and wonders of the universe, and the intellectual superiority of man, by which he becomes the master of those powers and the worker of wonders."[75] Ultimately, Powell's poetry reinforces his scientific writings while also equating science with religion and elevating highly evolved humans to the status of deities. As he wrote in an academic essay: "In savagery, the beasts are gods; in barbarism, the gods are men; in civilization, men are *as gods*, knowing good from evil."[76]

Conclusion: The Art and Science of Differentiation

Victorian authors eagerly incorporated ideas about the new science of evolution into their writings.[77] The English poet William Wordsworth, considered an originator of the Romantic

style, sought to trace in his own poetry "the primary laws of our nature."[78] Robert Browning, also an English poet, believed as did Wordsworth that the divine could be found in nature, but beyond this, "asserted the presence of God also in the moral struggles of the individual will." In addition, in his work, he suggested that the idea of development was "a principle to explain that educative process by which humanity advances toward perfection."[79] Powell's poetry parallels these themes. "The Soul" and "Becoming" are not explicitly racialized; however, when considering his larger oeuvre, it is possible to discern *implicit* comparisons between the forms of change celebrated in his poems, and cultural groups who he believes have not advanced to these stages. "The Soul" furthers understandings of humanity's relationship to the natural world that diverge strikingly from Indigenous peoples' connections to nature as they were understood by anthropologists of the time. In his professional writings, Powell outlined his understanding of different cultural groups' relationships to nature: "In savagery, the powers of nature are feared as evil demons; in barbarism, the powers of nature are worshipped as gods; in civilization, the powers of nature are apprenticed servants."[80] For Powell, Indigenous reverence for nature was a sign of less-developed cultural forms. The grand vision of nature he presented in his poetry stood as a counterpoint to existing forms of spirituality and cultural practices that were deeply connected with land, nature, and the environment.[81]

Powell's academic writings reveal his ideas about religious and racial difference: he believed in a form of cultural evolution and the superiority of Euro-Americans, ideas that justified the U.S. government's brutal assimilation policies. As part of his many professional and government positions, he justified his ideas about human cultural and spiritual difference based on what he believed to be scientific fact. Significantly, this U.S.-funded scientist also used aesthetics to support a multifaceted, racialized theory about the evolution of the human spirit, in

an era of government violence directed toward Native North Americans. Powell's dabbling in poetry reveals ideas that parallel his professional writing, but in a different form—furthering aesthetic and theological dimensions of cultural evolution.

In his 1889 essay "Evolution of Music from Dance to Symphony," published in the preeminent journal *Science*, Powell outlined his theory of human "qualitative differentiation." While he often compared human evolution to other forms of biological evolution in his efforts to present it as a "law," he noted an important distinction between the evolution of animals and human cultural evolution. While "animals become more and more diverse in structure and function… this law is reversed with men in civilization, for they become more and more homogenous."[82] The theory of "qualitative differentiation" accounted for the diversity among human cultures. According to this theory, human groups "differ mainly in the degree in which they have made progress." To illustrate these differences, he compared humans to apple trees:

> Human evolution develops not different kinds of men, but different qualities of men. The apple-tree under human culture does not develop in one line to bear peaches, another to bear plums, and another to bear pine-apples: the fruit of one tree is sour, and that of another is sweet; one is dwarfed, gnarled, and bitter, another is large, roseate, and luscious. Human progress is such culture. It develops different qualities and degrees of the same thing. There are apple-trees that bear nothing but sorry fruits. There are tribes of the world that are all savages."[83]

"The Soul" and "Becoming" further Powell's *poetics of differentiation*, which reinforced ideas presented in his scientific works, and added another layer to his argumentation: emotion. More broadly, we might consider Powell's poetics as part of an aesthetic arm of the ideological project of settler colonialism operating during the assimilation era. On the surface, these poems both narrate processes of development with romantic language, offering an evocative vision of humanity's place within the wider natural world. However, read in light of Powell's larger body of work on cultural evolution—especially his work on Native American cultural traditions on behalf of the Bureau of American Ethnology—a bitter vision of cultural superiority emerges

amidst his florid language. While scientific approaches to cultural evolution drew on data, facts, and evidence-based methodologies, the poetics of differentiation relied on imagery, mood, and expression to further notions of an essential cultural hierarchy between human groups. These poems reinforced the ideological project of settler colonialism, justifying Euro-American cultural supremacy over Indigenous peoples on cultural and aesthetic as well as scientific grounds.

Ultimately, Powell argued—in his scientific and poetic works—that all human cultures would naturally become more homogenous over time: "All arts, all institutions, all languages, all opinions, have grown in obedience to the laws of evolution."[84] According to this viewpoint, federal Indian assimilation policies were not attacking Native cultures, they were merely accelerating what was assumed to be an inevitable process—one that, according to Powell, was scientifically and divinely ordained.

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[2] Powell, "The Soul," 16.

[3] Reed, "Western Poetics," 262.

[4] Powell, "Becoming," 402.

[5] Holm, *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs*; Wenger, *We Have a Religion*; Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country*; McNally, *Defend the Sacred*; Dees, "Religion and U.S. Federal Indian Policy."
[6] See Deloria, *God is Red*; Hernández-Ávila, "Mediations of the Spirit;" and Niezen, *Spirit Wars*. On the longer history of Euro-American and Christian religious assimilation practices as cultural genocide, Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*.
[7] See Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies:* Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Tallbear, N*ative American DNA*; and Keel, *Divine Variations.*
[8] See Mulholland, "Poetry and Empire," and Burris, "An Empire of Poetry."
[9] Davis, *Biographical Memoir of John Wesley Powell*, 59.
[10] This number does include some publications that were simultaneously printed both individually and as part of larger collections including Bureau of American Ethnology *Annual Reports*; however, later re-prints are not included. Thomas's *John Wesley Powell: An Annotated Bibliography* provides a comprehensive overview of works by and about Powell up to its date of publication.
[11] See Thomas, *Powell: An Annotated Bibliography*, 148-164, for dozens of works published from the nineteenth century through 1999. Powell's expeditions have continued to capture the attention of writers and readers in the twenty-first century; more recent works include Dolnick, *Down the Great Unknown*; Kuhne, *River Master*; Lago, *The Powell Expedition*; and Ross, *The Promise of the Grand Canyon*.
[12] Cook-Lynn analyzes the harm of these narratives in the essay "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner," which was published in an essay collection by the same name. Wallace Stegner was a celebrated author of the American West who Cook-Lynn critiques for erasing Native histories and creating narratives in which European immigrants and their descendants supersede Native Americans. According to Cook-Lynn, Stegner's work "serves to make the claim of the nativeness of all European immigrants to this land more valid because such indigenous populations as are described here will not last long" (34). While she does not directly address it in her essay, Stegner wrote a popular biography of Powell, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, which lauds his accomplishments as an explorer.
[13] A notable exception is Regna Darnell, who acknowledges Powell's role in the development of U.S. government-supported anthropology. See Darnell, *Invisible Genealogies*.
[14] Judd, *The Bureau of American Ethnology*.
[15] Dees, "An Equation of Language and Spirit."
[16] Morgan, *Ancient Society*.
[17] See Dees, "An Equation of Language and Spirit."
[18] Powell, "Human Evolution," 176.
[19] Kundt, *Contemporary Evolutionary Theories of Culture*, 11-25.
[20] Powell, *The Three Methods of Evolution.*
[21] Powell, "Becoming," 398.
[22] Powell, "Becoming," 399.
[23] Powell, Becoming," 400.
[24] Powell, Becoming," 400.
[25] Powell, "Becoming," 401.
[26] Powell, "Becoming," 402.
[27] Powell, "Becoming," 402.

[28] For a discussion of how Darwin's theories were applied to social contexts, see Paul, "Darwin, Social Darwinism and Eugenics."
[29] Powell, "Human Evolution," 208.
[30] Powell, *The Three Methods of Evolution*, xlvii.
[31] Powell, "Competition as a Factor in Human Evolution," 303.
[32] Powell, "Competition as a Factor in Human Evolution," 311.
[33] Powell, "The Evolution of Religion," 183.
[34] Powell, "The Evolution of Religion," 184.
[35] Powell, "From Savagery to Barbarism," 173.
[36] Powell, "The Evolution of Religion," 185.
[37] Powell, "Sociology," cxxv.
[38] Powell, "Sociology," cxxv.
[39] Powell, "Evolution of Music," 245.
[40] Powell, "Evolution of Music," 245.
[41] Powell, "The Soul," 1.
[42] Powell, "The Soul," 1.
[43] Powell, "The Soul," 2.
[44] Powell, "The Soul," 2.
[45] Powell, "The Soul," 2.
[46] Powell, "Human Evolution," 181.
[47] Powell, "Human Evolution," 201.
[48] Powell, "The Soul," 2.
[49] Powell, "The Soul," 2.
[50] It is worth pointing out that Powell uses identifies four mythical groups, in alignment with Powell's conceptualization of the development of culture through four stages.
[51] Powell, *Philosophic Bearings of Darwinism*, 4.
[52] Powell, *Philosophic Bearings of Darwinism*, 4.
[53] Powell, *Philosophic Bearings of Darwinism*, 7.
[54] Powell, *Philosophic Bearings of Darwinism*, 9.
[55] Powell, "The Soul," 5.
[56] For an overview of numerous ways writers were engaging with scientific thought in this era, see Holmes and Ruston's edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science*.
[57] Powell, "The Soul," 5.
[58] Powell, "The Soul," 6.
[59] Powell, "The Evolution of Religion," 201.
[60] Powell, "The Soul," 6.
[61] Powell periodically came up with idiosyncratic terms that did not gain wider usage. "Reflexion" and "acception" are two instances.
[62] Powell, "The Soul," 7.
[63] Powell, "The Soul," 8.
[64] Powell, "The Soul," 8.
[65] Powell, "The Soul," 9.
[66] Powell, "The Evolution of Religion."
[67] Powell, "The Soul," 12.
[68] Powell, "From Barbarism to Civilization," 119.

[69] Powell, "The Soul," 14.
[70] Powell, "The Soul," 15.
[71] Powell, "The Soul," 16.
[72] Powell, "The Soul," 16.
[73] Powell, *Truth and Error*.
[74] Powell, "Becoming," 403.
[75] Powell, "From Civilization to Barbarism," 123.
[76] Powell, "From Civilization to Barbarism," 123. Emphasis in the original.
[77] Neill, *Primitive Minds*.
[78] Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 81.
[79] Fisher, "The Idea of Evolution in Robert Browning's Poetry," 534.
[80] Powell, "From Barbarism to Civilization," 124.
[81] For a recent overview of historical and modern-day Indigenous perspectives on nature and the environment, see Crawford-O'Brien with Talamantez, *Religion and Culture in Native America*—in particular Chapter 2, "Earth," Chapter 3, "Climate and Conservation," and Chapter 4, "Water."
[82] Powell, "Evolution of Music from Dance to Symphony," 244.
[83] Powell, "Evolution of Music from Dance to Symphony," 244.
[84] Powell, "Evolution of Music from Dance to Symphony," 245.