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Whitman and Disability: An Introduction

Don James McLaughlin and Clare Mullaney

The pathways our contributors seek are divergent and take myriad forms. As Whitman would have preferred, they describe contradictory perspectives and incommensurable ontologies. And yet, they find common ground in the alternative mobilities they take to reach their destinations.

In May 1889, Walt Whitman’s friends bought the poet a wheelchair for his birthday. The elaborate celebration planned that year was scheduled to take place on the day of his birth, May 31, when Whitman would turn seventy. But the task of purchasing Whitman a wheeled “out-door push chair” (as it is called in his correspondence) commenced earlier that month.^[1] Finding it increasingly difficult to go outside, Whitman confessed to Horace Traubel on May 6 that he was beginning to feel cooped up at his home at 328 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey. “How good it would be,” he said, “to get out into the air—freely to breathe it out of doors once more.”^[2] Traubel mentioned that members of his celebration committee Henry L. Bonsall and Geoffrey Buckwalter had suggested they find Whitman a wheelchair, saying they “would fix the rest of it,” meaning they would cover the expense.^[3] Whitman perked up. “I think we might try it, boy,” he said.^[4] The search was quickly underway.

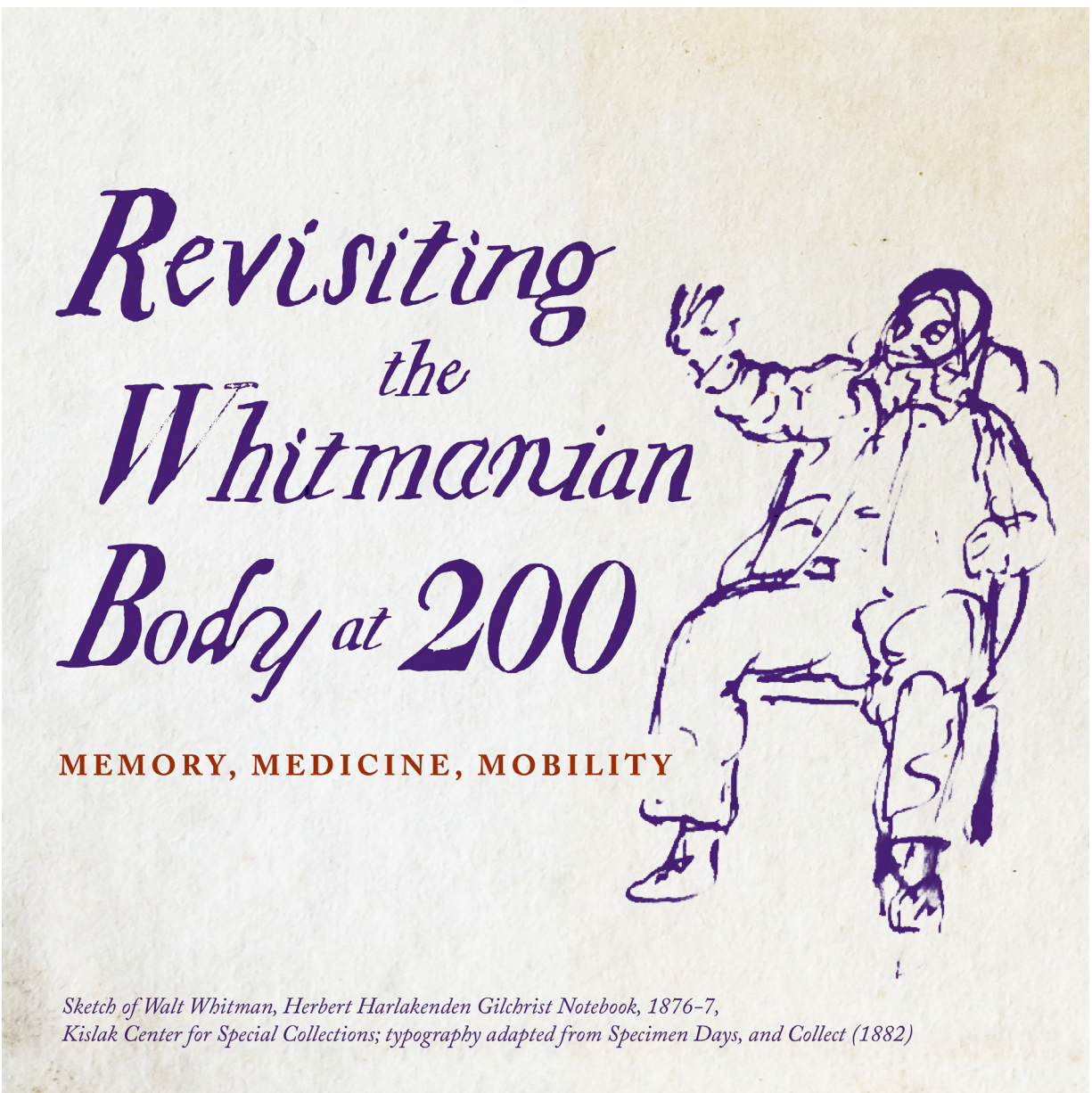


Figure 1. The sketch above is taken from Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist's Notebook, kept from 1876-1877, when he lived in Philadelphia and became close with Whitman. Gilchrist spent time with Whitman as the poet pursued forms of rehabilitation outdoors at Timber Creek in Camden, New Jersey. Whitman had experienced a major paralytic stroke in 1873, which left him partially paralyzed on his left side. Gilchrist recorded their conversations in his notebook, now held at the Kislak Center for Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania. On one of the pages he has drawn Whitman in a seated position, apparently in mid-sentence with his right arm raised. The lettering for this graphic has related significance. Whitman was right-handed. In 1875 another stroke had affected his ability to write. Correspondence reveals that Whitman expressed his frustration to Gilchrist about the way an intensifying "rheumatism" was changing his handwriting. The lettering above is adapted from the title page created for *Specimen Days, and Collect* (1882), the book Stephen Kuusisto has called Whitman's "disability memoir." We speculate that the lettering created for *Specimen Days* was designed to represent the influence of Whitman's rheumatic episodes on his penmanship. Thus, we have aimed for continuity in the shape and style of the letters in this rendition of the present issue's title.

Whitman already had in mind the kind of chair he wanted. He had become familiar with wheelchairs available for rent at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 (fig. 2). “I know very well the chairs they used at the Centennial, but I want one a little different from them in shape: they were short-backed—I want a back up this high,” he told Traubel, “motioning above his head.”^[5] He continued: “I do not object to plainness—in fact, I want a plain chair, but want comfort—a big back. And the seat must be liberal in size—and it must be strong.”^[6] Later that evening, additional preferences occurred to him. “I want a plain chair—no cushions—not a cushioned chair,” he clarified, “wicker-bottom, something like that—and solid.”^[7] Traubel interjected, “And liberal in size.” Whitman agreed, “Yes—that undoubtedly. But that will come about easily. Most of the users of these chairs are old plugs like me—broad at the beam—who won’t be squeezed down at their time of life.”^[8] By the next day he had prepared a card for Traubel with explicit instructions:

Wanted:

A strong first-rate out-door chair for an old 200 lb. invalid—to be pushed or pulled along the sidewalks and on the ferry boats—roomy chair, back high—ratan or reed seating and back (no cushions or stuffing)

Go to Wanamaker’s [Grand Depot, at Market Street and 13th Street in Philadelphia] first and interview the charge of the chair &c. Department and show hi[m] this card—[\[9\]](#)

The next day Traubel took the ferry to Philadelphia, accompanied by Whitman’s nurse Ed Wilkins, to see if they could find something aligned with Whitman’s wishes. “At Wanamaker’s we hit upon a chair which Ed fell in love with,” Traubel tells us.^[10] By May 9, it was all Whitman could talk about. “I hate to miss all these fine days,” he told Traubel. “Oh! well—there are plenty more to come!” Traubel adds in his record, “He speaks to everyone of the possibility of getting out at last.”^[11] By May 10, it had arrived at the house on Mickle Street and awaited Whitman’s exploration in the parlor.

Before proceeding with this story—before moving from the chair’s arrival to Whitman’s encounter with it—we use this introduction to frame the themed issue that follows. Coinciding with the bicentennial anniversary of Whitman’s birth, this special issue of *Common-place Journal* proposes a reexamination of the poet’s life and work, beginning with the birthday of 1889. Two hundred years ago, Walt



LOOKING EAST.—DRAWN BY SCHELL AND HOGAN, FROM PHOTOGRAPHS AND SKETCHES.—[SEE PAGE 556.]

Figure 2. “The Centennial—Interior of the Main Building near the Music Stand, Looking East,” *Harper’s Weekly* (July 8, 1876): 553. This illustration, taken from a double-page centerfold, features one of the wheelchairs visitors could rent at the exhibition. As Elizabeth Guffey notes in *Designing Disability: Symbols, Space, and Society* (London: 2017), this “precedent of access” was an important feature of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Whitman was born in Huntington, Long Island, New York. Remembered as the poet of many things—of democracy, of the working class, of Lincoln’s mourning, of comradeship—Whitman is again the subject of collective memory. Feeling back toward his presence, local, national, and international commemorations feature celebrations, reunions, festivals, public readings, and public art as well as scholarly reconsiderations, instructive critique, and contested remembering. This issue participates in these diverse forms of recollection. And yet, rather than starting in the year 1819, we ask what it would mean to start seventy birthdays afterward, the year his friends brought him a new wheelchair from Wanamaker’s. This moment brings together a celebration of life amidst old age and increasing debility. Prompted by this juxtaposition, we take the occasion of the bicentennial to ask: what else is there to say about the Whitmanian body, in particular? What dimensions have scholars missed? Which parts have we left out?

Considering the extent and importance of the scholarship that has been written on representations of the body in Whitman, these questions may seem like an inadvisable starting point. Can there be anything left to disinter, really? Daunting as the task is, we take it as instructive that the poet’s body was never really buried to begin with. Not entirely, that is. Most of his remains reside in an elaborate, granite, self-designed tomb on a hillside in Camden’s Harleigh Cemetery. But not everything made it in. After his death, Mary Oakes Davis, the steadfast housekeeper on Mickle Street since 1885, gave locks of his hair to his friends. The gray strands reached the likes of John Burroughs and Herbert Gilchrist and can now be accessed at the University of Pennsylvania, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and elsewhere (fig. 3). More gruesome is the story of Whitman’s brain. Following the poet’s autopsy on March 27, 1892, Philadelphia physician Dr. Henry Ware Cattell removed Whitman’s brain with the intent of preservation. Under a year later, the preservation effort had gone south. “I am a fool,” Cattell confessed in his diary, “a damnable fool, with no conscious memory, or fitness for any learned position. I let Walt Whitman’s brain spoil by not having the jar properly covered. Discovered it in the morning.”^[12] These details are morbid. But this recollection of Whitman’s dispersed material body—disseminated in the form of relics and as decomposing matter^[13]—is, perhaps, the best place to begin for a revisiting of the Whitmanian body we think we know well. Reliably, as he said would be the case, Whitman’s body exceeds and eludes our best efforts to contain it.

Building on previous scholarship, we propose that there is more to be said about the ways bodies enter and move across his life and writing. Specifically, this issue aims to draw attention to intersections between Whitman and four growing

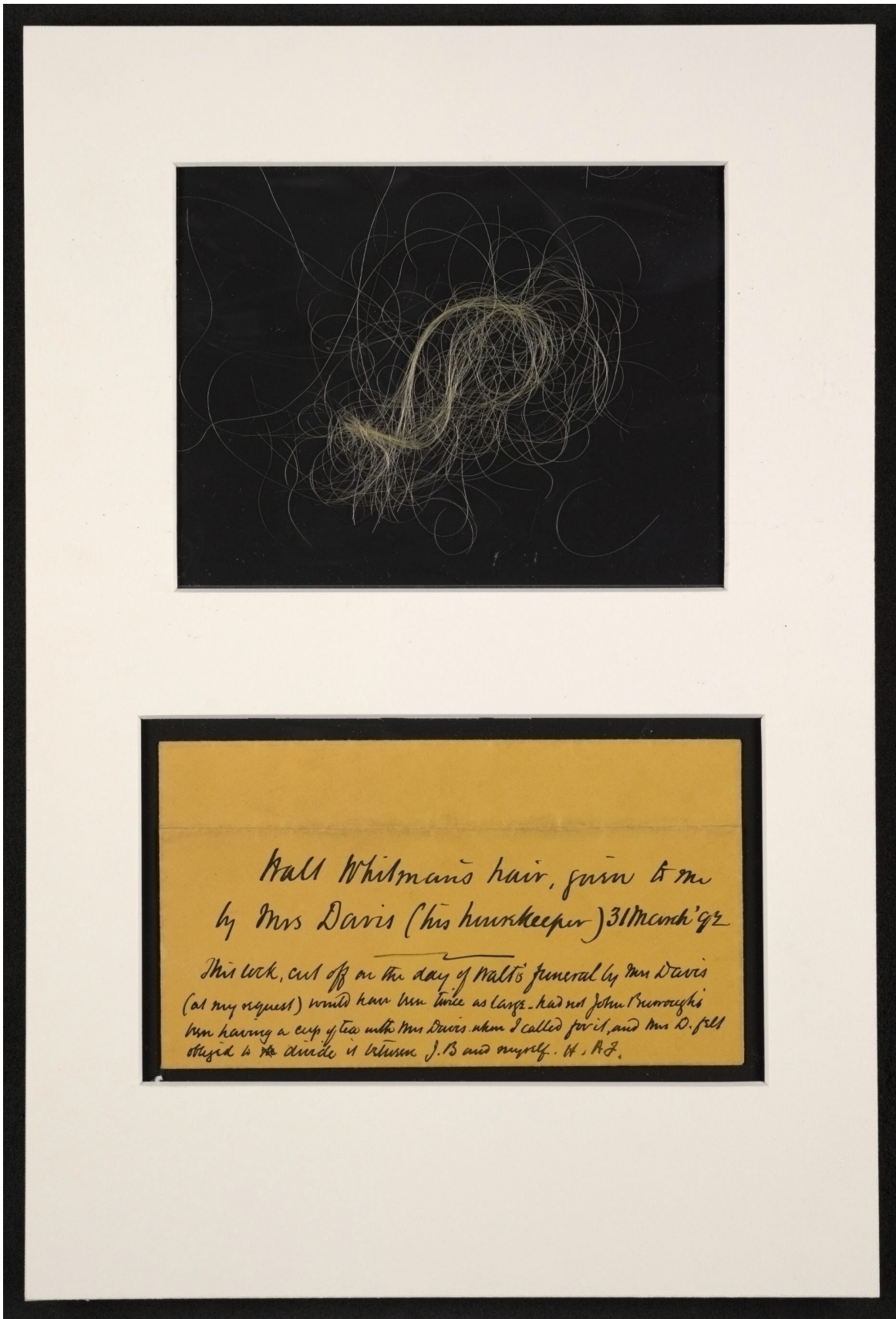


Figure 3. Lock of hair from Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman Papers in the Charles E. Feinberg Collection: Miscellany, 1834-1918.

fields of scholarship that intersect in important ways: the medical humanities; memory studies and its relationship to theories of mind; age discourse; and, most centrally, as an area of inquiry connecting all of the pieces that follow, the field of disability studies.

Contextualizing Whitman in Nineteenth-Century Disability History

A brief history of disability studies will help frame the scholarship that follows. Disability studies (DS) has grown rapidly over the last three-and-a-half decades. Beginning in the 1980s, DS importantly distinguished between two models of disability: the medical model and the social model. While medical discourse has traditionally located disability in individual bodies, the social model of disability considers how built environments and social attitudes constitute disabling forces by creating barriers to access. That is, DS focuses less on fixing individual bodies than interrogating the social structures that disable some while enabling others. To politicize disability as a social phenomenon allows us to shift away from seeing bodies as disabled and to consider instead the interactions between those bodies and steep staircases, curbs without cuts, and inaccessible forms of transportation. At the same time, with the expansion of the category of disability beyond the iconic wheelchair user to include people with mental and chronic disabilities, the tension between social and medical models of disability has become the subject of ongoing debate. More recently, scholars such as Beth Linker and Catherine Kudlick have suggested the importance of placing disability theory and medical care in dialogue.^[14] Other scholars such as Tobin Siebers and Alison Kafer have proposed alternative models that consider the material realities of the body alongside their social experiences.^[15] One goal of the scholarship in this special issue is to combine these approaches, recognizing the social construction of disability, alongside potentially intersecting categories such as age and neurodiversity, while also examining and reimagining the intersection between disability, medical care, and access.

The matter of historical change introduces another dimension. Because disability studies emerged out of the disability civil rights movement of the late twentieth-century U.S., a majority of work in literary disability criticism has focused on post-1945 literature. While Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her important book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*, addressed the proliferation of impairments in the nineteenth-century U.S., Sari Altschuler makes a call for disability studies to more “carefully historicize discussions of disability in American literary and cultural studies.”^[16] We cannot

rely on contemporary definitions of disability to frame our understanding of it in the past. Drawing our attention to early novelistic representations, Altschuler notes that in the early nineteenth-century U.S., disability was understood as “impairment” rather than “identity.” Thus, writers tend to cast disability not as a claimed identity but rather as a bodily limitation. In a related argument, Ellen Samuels has shown how mid-nineteenth century shifts in American politics and medicine set the terms for a reconfiguration of political subjectivity through “fantasies of identification,” meaning an impulse to “definitively identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity.”^[17] Tensions between earlier conceptions of disability as impairment and burgeoning cultures of identification grow increasingly prevalent in the postbellum period.

It is significant to note that these historical frameworks do not always fit comfortably with disability activism, given the way historicist scholarship is often used to interrogate and denaturalize modern identity politics. Nevertheless, to understand how people in nineteenth-century and early American contexts understood the social experience of disablement, it is necessary to attend to its diverse forms and terminologies depending on context. Disability studies’ more recent emphasis on impairment and its social effects offers a reminder that pre-twentieth-century historicism and critical theory are not incompatible. Rather, as Altschuler, Samuels, Benjamin Reiss, and other scholars have demonstrated, attention to the historical dimensions of disability provides an opportunity to combine historicist and theoretical models in ways both generative and genuine to the experiences they are used to document and understand.^[18]

This issue of *Common-place* posits as one of its central premises that disability studies has the potential to transform approaches to Whitman’s oeuvre. Contributors show that Whitman played an important role in shaping conceptions of ability and debility among nineteenth-century readerships. In the poem titled “Broad-Axe Poem” in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, for instance, Whitman imagines superior health as the engine of human progress. “Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands, / Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands, / There the greatest city stands,” he proclaims. Later in the same poem, he proceeds: “All waits, or goes by default, till a strong being appears; / A strong being is the proof of the race, and of the ability of the universe.” Here Whitman appeals not just to illustrations of wellness but also to superlatives indexing health at its utmost limit—the “healthiest fathers” and “best-bodied mothers”

(what the poem elsewhere calls “the brawniest breed”) — as the most important metrics of civilizational worth. He continues by routing these metrics through one of his favorite rhetorical modes: a rhetoric of exemplarity (familiar in the self-descriptive sequence from 1855, “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos”), contending that a “strong being” bears the weight not just of its species, but, moreover, of providing “proof” for the “ability of the universe.”^[19] Here and elsewhere, Whitman frames *Leaves of Grass* as a tribute to superior bodily forms.

Acknowledging the repetition of this emphasis in Whitman’s writing allows us to better understand how his poetry contributed to establishing within nineteenth-century American (and transatlantic) letters what disability theorist Tobin Siebers terms an “ideology of ability.”^[20] With this concept, Siebers designates a social preoccupation with “natural gifts, talents, intelligence, creativity, prowess, imagination, education, [and] the eagerness to strive” — a list closely resembling Whitman’s own penchant for cataloging desired attributes and achievements, particularly of the male physique. Think, for instance, of Whitman’s invocation of the enslaved man at auction in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. A section that advocates for recognizing the humanity of the enslaved, it does so by routing that advocacy through an enumeration of the enslaved body’s signs of exceptional physical capacity:

Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning
in tendon and nerve;
They shall be stript that you may see them.
Exquisite senses, lifelike eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breastmuscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby,
goodsized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

Reliably in *Leaves of Grass*, in the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions especially, Whitman grounded his iconic honesty about the natural functions of the human body within a celebration of normative bodily capacity, which he used to unite people divided by other social and economic categories. It would be a mistake to understand this element of the early editions as consistent or ideologically stable. As early as the 1855 edition of the poem that would later be called “Song of Myself,” Whitman troubles his own imperatives, clarifying, I “know that they

who have eyes are divine, and the blind and lame are equally divine, / And that my steps drag behind yours yet go before them, / And are aware how I am with you no more than I am with everybody.” Even in the 1856 version of “Broad-Axe Poem” quoted above, Whitman conjures the material body of the axe that introduces the poem as a personification of physiological alterity: “BROAD-AXE, shapely, naked, wan! / Head from the mother’s bowels drawn! / Wooded flesh and metal bone! limb only one and lip only one!” Here and elsewhere, we find a fluid, ever-shifting relationship to age and embodiment to be one of the most prominent characteristics of Whitman’s writing. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Whitman’s celebration of the capable body, of supreme health without defect, became one of the most familiar qualities associated with his aphoristic style.

Keeping this aspect of Whitman’s work in mind, this issue proposes, simultaneously, that to regard Whitman’s work as operating from an exclusively “able” vantage point is to discount the ways Whitman ventures to inhabit a radically diverse array of embodiments, both in his poetry and in the way he crafted his authorial persona around his work. Reliably, Whitman’s writing undermines imperatives to aspire to a fully normative physicality. The journalism and memoranda composed during the Civil War, deeply informed by his experience as a visitor to Washington’s makeshift military hospitals, embrace and linger with the experience of both physical and affective pain. Increasingly, as *Leaves of Grass* evolves over time, we find its author dismantling binary conceptions of bodily wholeness and partiality. Following his first stroke, which left Whitman paralyzed on his left side, concise notes jotted down outdoors in New Jersey revel in and unfold alternative mobilities. Broadly speaking, across the last three decades of his life—in his correspondence, autobiographical meditations, and the late annexes added posthumously to *Leaves of Grass*—we find Whitman articulating with unmitigated candor his familiarity with illness, injury, disablement, and aging. For readers familiar with Whitman’s biography, these turns will not seem surprising. Whitman offers a far-reaching account of disability and its nineteenth-century coordinates because his relationship to it became both proximate and deeply personal. While *Leaves of Grass* remained complex, retaining the poet’s attachment to virility and youth, from the war onward especially we find Whitman wrestling with difficult questions, from a recurring disenchantment with dominant medical protocol to his strategic manipulation of the fungibility of age discourse in crafting his public persona.

Why Whitman's Body Now, Again?

Whitman's bicentennial provides an opportunity to put cultural scripts oriented around celebrations of birth and life in dialogue with the transformative understanding of the body we encounter in scholarship at the intersection of disability, aging, theories of mind, and the history of medicine. In our most familiar narratives, birth conjures innocence, defenselessness, and a life yet unimagined. But the commemoration of aging, which birthdays denote, invites a plethora of social maneuverings. Birthdays may occasion merrymaking and quiet meditation. Rarely are birthdays accompanied by a seamless alignment between age and how old one feels. On the contrary, birthdays often disorient the bodies for which they account. As Sari Edelstein observes in her essay in this issue, Whitman was well-acquainted with the paradoxical, socially produced rhetorics of age operative during his lifetime, to the extent that he regularly relied "on age as a performative site of his imagined embodiments and as a strategy for enacting his universalizing project." Thus, we ask, what better opportunity than Whitman's 200th birthday to investigate his play with, refusals of, and shifting orientation toward corporeal expectations?

Previous Whitman scholarship has rarely grappled with the poet's exploration of disability, even as these themes pervade his poetry, prose, notebooks, and correspondence. It is important to acknowledge that work has been done on his relationship to histories of medicine. Critics have discussed the many doctors the poet interacted with over the course of his life.^[21] Much has been said about the medical care Whitman himself provided during the Civil War in Washington's hospitals. And much has been written on Whitman's intersection with nineteenth-century medical science, including phrenology,^[22] mesmerism,^[23] hydropathy,^[24] evolutionary biology,^[25] and the chemistry of decomposition.^[26] This previous scholarship informs this special issue, but just as disability studies as a field has urged scholars to explore the history of medicine with a critical lens, in order to illuminate and redefine disability as a social state comprising forms of embodiment that may intersect with but also far exceed medical discourse, so too does it become necessary to place a more precise focus on representations of disability and aging in Whitman's writings.

A few scholarly contributions stand out for the roles they have played in opening up a conversation about Whitman and disability thus far. In his essay "How Dare a Sick Man or an Obedient Man Write Poems?" Robert J. Scholnick (one of the contributors to the present issue), provides a formative intervention into

the complexity and contradictory nature of Whitman's writing on disability.^[27] Scholnick demonstrates that, on the one hand, Whitman's antebellum writing "deployed a rhetoric of health, disease, and disability to address the national crisis" over slavery, exploiting figures of disability to posit a "metonymic" relationship between national crisis and bodily impairment ("The Eighteenth Presidency!" being a prime example). By contrast, Scholnick shows how Whitman's postbellum work, especially the prose and poetry he began to compose as a hospital visitor during the Civil War, begins to articulate a reconsideration of the significance of debility and a shift toward a national culture built on empathy. Building on Scholnick's essay, though in the context of writing Whitman did after his stroke in 1873, poet and critic Stephen Kuusisto has proposed that we should understand the poet's experimental 1882 autobiography *Specimen Days, and Collect* as a major "progenitor" of the "disability memoir," characterized by "a wholly conscious rendering of altered physicality in prose."^[28] In addition to Scholnick and Kuusisto's work, we find Max Cavitch's work on Whitman's poetics of bereavement in *American Elegy* to be critical for its call to reconsider the relationship between pain and eroticism in *Drum-Taps* and elsewhere.^[29] In an analysis of the elegy for Lincoln "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd," Cavitch shows how Whitman develops a poetics of mourning where the debilitating effects of bereavement prove to be unexpectedly compatible with "the staggering pathos of erotic liberation."

In addition to these influences, this special issue of *Common-place* takes particular inspiration from two recent contributions to Whitman scholarship. One is Zachary Turpin's 2015 discovery of a previously unknown newspaper column from 1858 devoted to health and fitness advice, published by Whitman under the pseudonym "Mose Velsor," titled "Manly Health and Training: With Off-Hand Hints toward Their Conditions."^[30] A surname he took from his mother, the Velsor persona gave Whitman a platform to adapt a poetics increasingly invested in fraternity to a readership expected to train their bodies toward its author's imagined ideals. Why dip into a lesser genre even after the poet had won and publicized the approval of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others? With the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass* achieving limited circulation and recognition, Velsor got Whitman paid. However, as contributors to this issue show, a notable ideological cohesion also links *Leaves of Grass* to Whitman's exercise advice. Most importantly for the present issue, "Manly Health and Training" provides insight into the evolution of Whitman's perspective on health, medicine, and antebellum standards of physical capacity. On the one hand, as multiple contributors to this issue discuss, Whitman's early dread of disease and debility is on full display. "[W]hat can be more debilitating than to be continually surrounded by sickly people, and to have to do with them

only?” Velsor writes. On the other hand, as Manuel Herrero-Puertas notes in his review of Turpin’s 2017 edition of the series, published in this issue, contradictions abound, and the series features compelling instabilities wrought by Whitman’s willful appropriation of popular science.

This issue also takes inspiration from one of its contributors, scholar and poet Lindsay Tuggle, whose poetry is featured here and whose 2017 book *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman’s Civil War* makes a major contribution to our understanding of Whitman’s intersection with the history of medicine. ^[31] Exquisitely written, *The Afterlives of Specimens* introduces many important insights and revelations, among them a compelling interpretation of Whitman’s approach to the medical concept named in Tuggle’s title, the *specimen*, and a reading of the rise of embalming practices as they influenced *Drum-Taps*. As noted in the review of *The Afterlives of Specimens* published in this issue, although Tuggle does not engage with disability studies in a concentrated way, her book evinces a clear investment in many of the questions scholars of disability pursue. Without a doubt, any scholar engaged in historicizing the intersection between Whitman and nineteenth-century conceptions of disability will find *The Afterlives of Specimens* to be an invaluable resource, and multiple pieces here engage with Tuggle as they embark upon this work. Four of Tuggle’s own poems appear in this issue, accompanied by a statement on her research methods and the way they influence her poetic craft, an influence that, in turn, offers insight into the practices that inform her scholarship.

Before concluding this introduction, we want to introduce what we take to be the five major contributions to Whitman and disability studies provided in our featured essays. In keeping with our stated intent of putting disability history and critical theory in dialogue, each of the essays articulates an original vantage point for undertaking this work.

Jess Libow’s article “Song of My Self-Help: Whitman’s Rehabilitative Reading” inaugurates this issue by historicizing Whitman’s conceptions of ability through the rise of antebellum self-help literature as a familiar genre. Libow goes further by demonstrating that the 1858 series of articles “Manly Health and Training” can only be adequately understood when it is put in dialogue with the self-help genre Whitman was attempting to imitate. Published between the second and third editions of *Leaves of Grass*, “Manly Health and Training” took inspiration from contemporary character and exercise advice manuals that emphasized everything from dietary reform and weight training to the practice of emotional

expression. In a groundbreaking turn, Libow shows that “Manly Health and Training” likewise incorporates advice on the health benefits of reading, as well as methodological instruction for getting the most out of a literature-inclusive exercise regimen. Through sensitive readings of Velsor’s health advice next to the editorial emendations being made to *Leaves of Grass* between 1856 and 1860, Libow shows how the series illuminates the material connection Whitman imagined between a praxis of reading poetry and the potential he intended to instill in the lines of his poetry to remake his reader’s body in a healthier form. Libow further demonstrates how “Manly Health and Training” is replete with representations of disability even as it advocates for their removal and effacement.

In “Whitman’s Wandering Mind,” Christopher Hanlon takes us on an exploration of Whitman’s corporeal forms of recollecting lost experience in *Leaves of Grass*, focusing especially on the third edition of 1860. Hanlon shows how Whitman processes memory in his poetry in the form of a “repetitive, invasive mental experience” of a “touch now absent.” Across the poet’s work, reckonings with loss thus provide an aperture onto forms of memory irreducible to mere cognition. In place of this limited understanding of memory, we find Whitman articulating an intimate, indivisible synthesis of body and mind. As Hanlon has noted elsewhere in scholarship on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s memory loss, during the mid-nineteenth century “mental processes were increasingly understood in terms of a greater integrating of psychic with somatic systems, biological matrixes composed of brain cells, the nervous system, and the electrical, chemical, magnetic, and reflexive processes through which such systems interacted and in which were composed a series of psychological effects.”^[32] Analyzing the poem that begins “Once I pass’d through a populous city,” Hanlon illuminates how Whitman deploys a similar integration of psychic and somatic phenomena. Invoking Margaret Price’s call to acknowledge the contemporary proliferation of discourse on neurodiversity not as an effect of constructed binaries but, rather, as a sign of genuine psychological variation,^[33] Hanlon shows how Whitman advanced a poetics of loss resonant with nineteenth-century explorations of psychopathology, which he embraced as a carefully studied, lifelong praxis.

Robert Scholnick’s article “Dispatches to Henry Raymond’s *New York Times*” draws our attention to journalistic coverage of the state of Washington’s military hospitals during the Civil War that Whitman published in the *New York Times*, writings that have tended to receive less attention than better-known works such as *Drum-Taps* (1865) and *Memoranda during the War* (1875). In these articles, Whitman endeavored to advocate on behalf of the unmet social and psychological

needs of the thousands of injured and dying soldiers transported to Washington's hospitals. More precisely, Scholnick argues that Whitman recognized the problem of wartime trauma, what psychiatrists now term post-traumatic stress disorder, and that he made it his duty to visit soldiers, many of them processing injury, disablement, and the trauma of the war simultaneously, and to encourage others to do the same. Along the way, Scholnick explores the way Whitman's journalism for the *New York Times* illustrated concrete practices Whitman advocated to intervene in standard medical protocol he found neglectful and physically harmful. In this way, Scholnick shows also how Whitman anticipates debates in disability studies concerning how medical and social models of representing injury and impairment shape the way people access medical care.

Turning to nineteenth-century material cultures of disability, Bethany Schneider brings us to Whitman's cane, which became necessary following the series of strokes that rendered him partially paralyzed. Beginning with her own pilgrimage to Whitman's deathbed, Schneider describes her fascination with his final wooden cane, currently propped up against a bedroom wall in the Camden house, on display. Sketching an early account of assistive technology, Schneider shows how the verb "to lean" functions in Whitman's life and poems. Schneider attends to how the cane represents not only disability but class, sexuality, and race relations in the nineteenth-century U.S. Through a philological investigation of the intersection between canes and Whitman's attraction to the metaphor of the calamus root in *Leaves of Grass*, Schneider goes on to demonstrate that, in fact, we cannot understand his poetics of same-sex desire without understanding the centrality of the cane as a material referent for the forms of sociality his "Calamus" sequence unfolds. The art of leaning, an action Whitman invokes in dialogue with vocabularies of disablement from the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* up through the late conversations recorded by Traubel, became for Whitman a primary referent for the adhesive togetherness at the center of his lifelong project.

Delving deeper into the subject of age discourse, Sari Edelstein explores Whitman's diverse articulations of aging in his postbellum writing and self-fashioning. As Edelstein has argued elsewhere regarding age as an analytic and discursive resource, "Chronological age" came to represent a consolidating "supervisory function" in the nineteenth century, "scripting individuals into age-appropriate behaviors, affects, and relationships."^[34] In dialogue with these shifting social roles, nineteenth-century literature sometimes functioned as a site of ideological parallelism, but it could also provide a resource for negotiation, contestation, and outright rebellion. In this same work, Edelstein calls for greater attention to points

of intersection between aging and disability. While we “cannot equate old age with disability,” she argues, as “embodied, stigmatized statuses” they “overlap as similarly subject to regulation, rehabilitation, and pathologization.”^[35] Exploring a constellation of what she calls “Whitman’s geriatric vistas,” Edelstein shows how Whitman at once insisted on candidly representing his experience of his aging body, while, at the same time, he strategically refashioned conventions of age discourse to his own reputational advantage.

We follow these five featured essays with additional segments that extend our focus on Whitman and disability studies, including two book reviews, a “Poetic Research” segment, and a segment for “Tales from the Vault.” The last of these explores a little-known publication of correspondence Whitman wrote documenting his experience of paralysis to his friend Peter Doyle, published posthumously under the title *Calamus* in 1897.

New Pathways, Alternative Mobilities

As we have noted, birthdays are complicated. They come with a lot of pressure. Occasions for looking backward (have I accomplished enough?) and forward (what is to come?), they impel self-reflection and attention to the body’s relationship to time. Whitman’s birthdays were no different. Some, like the seventieth birthday with which this issue begins, opened up new encounters. This was true of Whitman’s fourth birthday, too, which arrived just four days after his family’s move from Long Island to Brooklyn, a city (not yet consolidated as a borough) for which the poet famously developed a lifelong love. Others that this issue explores arrived in times of sadness, such as the birthday of 1873, which came just eight days after his mother, Louisa, had passed at the age of seventy-seven.

In 1863, the month of May found him volunteering at the war hospitals in Washington. Four days before that birthday, he wrote to Thomas P. Sawyer, “Well, dear brother, the great battle between Hooker & Lee came off, & what a battle it was—without any decisive results again, though at the cost of so many brave men’s lives & limbs—it seems too dreadful, that such bloody contests, without settling any thing, should go on. The hospitals here are filled with the wounded, I think the worst cases & the plentiest of any fighting yet.”^[36] Two years later, Whitman was watching the war come to a close. On May 24, 1865, he wrote, “FOR two days now the broad spaces of Pennsylvania avenue along to Treasury hill, and so by detour around to the President’s house, and so up to Georgetown,

and across the aqueduct bridge, have been alive with a magnificent sight, the returning armies.”^[37]

The 1889 birthday was momentous, in no small part because Whitman had successfully obtained the out-door push chair he desired. On the day the chair arrived at the Mickle Street house from Wanamaker’s, Traubel took it up to Whitman’s bedroom on the second floor. “Started to rise instantly,” Traubel says of the moment Whitman saw it.^[38] “It looks like a glorious opportunity!” were the first words out of the poet’s mouth. “Guess I’ll just step into it at once and have the question settled.” Once situated, he expressed his satisfaction immediately. “It seems just made for me—or I for it!” he said. “A perfect fit! And so easy too!” For a moment, Traubel says, he “sat there composedly.” The chair was not manual but designed to be pushed by a companion. Whitman began to direct his friend. “Move it, Horace,” he said, “let us see now how she goes.” Traubel recalls,

And when I saw that the mere motion seemed to rejoice him, I said jokingly, “If the worst comes, Ed can wheel you up and down the room [as opposed to trying it outdoors],” he replying, “That is so—but that would be a poor apology indeed for the real thing!”

Traubel called Ed into the room, and Ed began to push the chair, too, “moving it about, manipulating it easily.” They did not take it outside immediately. Instead, Mary Davis’s foster son Warren Fritzinger, who was also there, “kissed him good-bye and went out.” Ed soon followed. Whitman said to Traubel: “I guess I’ll stay in it a while. With my usual instinct to keep comfortable when I am so, I’ll stay in this good position!” Traubel writes, “And so there he sat, still in the middle of the floor, cane dangling from his hand, when I left.”

On May 11, the day after the chair’s arrival, Whitman went out. Ed guided the chair as Whitman directed. Later that evening, after they had returned home, Traubel records that Whitman was eager to recall the day to him. “[S]it down!” he said. “I have been out at last! The experiment has proved a success!”^[39] He went on, “I was out, I guess, more than an hour and a half. I sat half an hour in the front here, under the trees. We made quite an extensive detour, though we did not start out with that idea. I expected to go around the block, then stop. But when we got down the street, I had Ed go on, so that by going four or five blocks, we got to the [Delaware] river.” Traubel asked how he felt afterward, wondering if he felt “wearied.”^[40] Whitman corrected the misplaced worry. “No—quite the contrary—it exhilarated me.” Traubel says Whitman went on, “in his fervent way,” “And the



Figure 4. Dr. John Johnston, photographer, Warren “Warry” Fritzing (1866–1899) and Walt Whitman at the Camden docks, 1890. Copyprint. Digital ID# ppmsca-07548. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress (57). Whitman sits in his wheelchair from Wanamaker’s, holding his cane, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, and showing a content expression behind his white beard. Fritzing sports a black mustache, a white shirt under an open jacket, and a smaller derby hat, and rests his left hand on the top of Whitman’s chair.

chair...it was a wonderful true support—a revelation of ease and comfort.” “And we’re going again and again,” he said multiple times, “and we’ll send the good news to all our friends” (fig. 4).

The chair proceeds to become a prominent part of Traubel’s records. In concluding this introduction, however, we want to return to the first scene we receive of Whitman getting to know the new chair in his bedroom and deciding to remain in it as everyone exits the room, sitting “still in the middle of the floor, cane dangling from his hand.” In this evocative scene of Whitman seated, staying with his satisfaction, and seeing that satisfaction as a worthy pathway of its own—worth following, however fleeting—this issue begins. The pathways our contributors seek are divergent and take myriad forms. As Whitman would have preferred, they describe contradictory perspectives and incommensurable ontologies. And yet, they find common ground in the alternative mobilities they take to reach their destinations. The following essays, reviews, and meditations show Whitman’s corpus, notoriously capacious, to take a greater interest than critics have acknowledged in the interface between capacity and incapacity. We thus begin with the wheelchair in Whitman’s bedroom, his motion imminent. Here, once again, Whitman invites us to move with and alongside him.

END NOTES

[1] For references in the letters, see Walt Whitman's "Letter to William Douglas O'Connor," May 6, 1889, as well as his "Letter to William Sloane Kennedy," May 8, 1889.

[2] Horace Traubel. *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. 5. (1964): 139.

[3] Traubel, 139.

[4] Traubel, 139.

[5] Traubel, 139.

[6] Traubel, 139.

[7] Traubel, 140.

[8] Traubel, 140.

[9] Traubel, 144.

[10] Traubel, 152.

[11] Traubel, 154.

[12] For the recent essay that revealed this discovery to scholars, see Sheldon Lee Gosline. "I am a fool': Dr. Henry Cattell's Private Confession about What Happened to Whitman's Brain." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2014): 158-62.

[13] For a seminal work on the theme of "dissemination" in Whitman's life and poetry, see Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

[14] See Beth Linker's "On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History: A Survey of the Fields" in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87.4 (2013): 499-535 and Catherine Kudlick's "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'" in *The American Historical Review* 108.3 (2003): 763-793.

[15] See Alison Kafer's discussion of the "political/relational model" of disability in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington, IN, 2013) and Tobin Siebers's "Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body" in *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 737-754.

[16] See Altschuler's "'Ain't One Limb Enough': Historicizing Disability in the American Novel," *American Literature* 86.2 (2014): 147.

[17] See Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York, 2014). Samuels goes on to demonstrate how disability has at once been shaped by these ideologies of identification and functioned to problematize their basic assumptions. On the one hand, disability "haunts" the rise of identity politics, in that it has reliably "function[ed] as the trope and embodiment of true physical difference." Thus, we find literature on race, gender, and other categories of analysis consistently relying on vocabularies of disability to articulate the effects and nature of their corresponding disenfranchisement, sometimes through the invocation of medical authority, at other times by invoking disability figuratively. On the other hand, Samuels shows how "the disabled body presents a unique challenge to an identificatory system based upon classification, since its nonnormativity manifests itself through a vast diversity of form and function" (13) Thus, disability also exceeds the scope of liberal notions of identification, transgressing the imagined parameters of identity by virtue of its heterogeneous and endlessly proliferating forms.

[18] For more on the history of disability in early America, see Sari Altschuler and

Cristobal Silva's introduction to the special issue "Early American Disability Studies" in *Early American Literature* 52.1 (2017): 1-27. For a recent podcast on disability history in the nineteenth century, see Season 2, Episode 5 of the C19 podcast, "Beyond Ahab's Peg Leg: Disability in 19th-Century American Literature," featuring a conversation between Altschuler, Reiss, Samuels, and Ittai Orr.

[19] To be sure, in this toggling move, Whitman seems to lose control of his own nested extrapolations: the poem imagines comparative capacity as the necessary proof of ability for the universe itself. Yet, by virtue of its infinite totality, the universe has no exterior referent by which to measure the scope of ability Whitman alleges to evaluate.

[20] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory*. (Ann Arbor, 2008).

[21] Charles Feinberg. "Walt Whitman and His Doctors." *Archives of Internal Medicine* Vol. 114, No. 6 (1964): 834-842.

[22] Michael Warner, "Introduction." *The Portable Walt Whitman*. Penguin, 2003.

[23] See Catherine Waitinas, "'Animal Magnetism': The 'Cotemporary' Roots of Whitman's 'Is Mesmerism True?'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (2016), 55-68.

[24] See Harold Aspiz, "Specimen Days: The Therapeutics of Sun-Bathing." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1 (1983), 48-50.

[25] See Robert J. Scholnick, "Science." J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998).

[26] See Maria Farland, "Decomposing City: Walt Whitman's New York and the Science of Life and Death." *ELH*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Winter 2007): 799-827.

[27] Robert J. Scholnick, "'How Dare a Sick Man or an Obedient Man Write Poems?': Whitman and the Dis-ease of the Perfect Body." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, et. al (Modern Language Association, 2002).

[2] Stephen Kuusisto, "Walt Whitman's 'Specimen Days' and the Discovery of the Disability Memoir." *Prose Studies*, vol. 27, No. 1-2 (2005): 155-162.

[29] Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*. (Minneapolis 2006).

[30] See Zachary Turpin's edition, *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body* (New York: 2017).

[31] Lindsay Tuggle, *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War* (Iowa City, 2017).

[32] Christopher Hanlon, *Emerson's Memory Loss: Originality, Communitarity, and the Late Style*. (Oxford, 2018): 26.

[33] See Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor, 2011).

[34] Sari Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age*. (Oxford, 2019), 6.

[35] Edelstein, 13

[36] Walt Whitman, "Letter to Thomas P. Sawyer" (May 27, 1863).

[37] Walt Whitman. *Specimen Days, and Collect* (Philadelphia, 1882): 73.

[38] Traubel, 167

[39] Traubel, 169.

[40] Traubel, 170.

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