



Tuggle, Lindsay. The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War [review]

Adam Bradford
abradfo5@fau.edu

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dence, trade journals, Supreme Court cases, local newspapers and their exchange lists, historical maps, and contemporary historical markers. Cohen's account of who was reading Whitman, how they understood him, and how Whitman himself grappled with evidence of the uncontrolled circulation of his work will surprise even seasoned Whitman scholars. His archival ingenuity ought to give a new generation of critics the tools to think and write about the relatively uncharted space between author and reader, production and reception.

Rutgers University

MEREDITH L. MCGILL



LINDSAY TUGGLE. *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xiv + 254 pp.

There are a host of scholars whose monographs have considered either Whitman's literary relationship to medical science or to grief and mourning practices with an especial focus on the Civil War. One thinks, perhaps, of M. Wynn Thomas's *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (1987), Greg Eiselein's *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era* (1996), Robert Leigh Davis's *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* (1997), Harold Aspiz's *So Long! Walt Whitman's Poetry of Death* (2004), Mitchell Breitweiser's *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (2007), Max Cavitch's *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), and Adam Bradford's *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning* (2014). None of these, however, has sought to bring together the ways that Whitman's mourning of the lost soldiers of the Civil War is navigated through discourses both poetic and medical to anywhere near the degree that Lindsay Tuggle does in *The Afterlives of Specimens*. She has sought to triangulate Whitman's experience of and response to the war

through, in her words, “intersecting scientific and mourning communities” that were largely fixated on “the human cadaver and its abandoned parts” (14).

Tuggle makes good on her promise to show how deeply imbricated Whitman’s response to war and loss was with respect to the scientific ideas and medical practices of the time. Her most powerful contributions emerge as she connects Whitman’s work to that of John H. Brinton, the curator of the period’s Army Medical Museum, and Silas Weir Mitchell, medical luminary and the first to diagnose phantom limb syndrome. In teasing out the curious parallels between the war-time experiences of Whitman and Brinton, Tuggle shows how both men were deeply attuned to the need to preserve something of those “specimens,” the many brave and beloved soldiers that they encountered in the hospitals—and, through a comparative examination of their practice, she illuminates the archives, literary or otherwise, created by each. Moreover, in reading Whitman’s prose and poetry in light of the emergent medical science associated with phantom-limb syndrome, Tuggle accretes new and powerful layers of interpretive signification onto the many “phantoms” that haunt Whitman’s Civil War work. What emerges, as a result, is a compelling narrative that offers new insight into how Whitman’s personal experience of loss during and after the Civil War was mediated through contemporary scientific thought, emergent medical practices, and literary inscription.

Tuggle begins her work with an analysis of the prevalent sentimental and emerging scientific views of the body that were generally in conflict with one another during the period. Through an examination of the practices of “resurrectionists”—medically motivated body snatchers seeking corpses for anatomical study—she analyzes the nature of the conflict that existed between them and the vast majority of the populace who saw the deceased body as a sacrosanct trace of the dead that merited veneration, not dissection. Whitman, ever a believer in the divinity of the body, was vehemently opposed to body snatching, as Tuggle points out, but nevertheless “recognized the medical advancement that

anatomy promised...[and was thus] able to divorce resurrectionism from the science underpinning the market for stolen bodies” (37). At the heart of the resurrectionist’s practice was a perception of the human body as a “specimen,” an idea that, she argues, Whitman not only imports into his poetry from such a practice, but fuses with his own ideas regarding the divinity of the body: “cadavers were incorporated as raw material by nineteenth-century anatomists, [but] Whitman incorporated ‘outcast’ bodies towards very different ends. The specimen is not a dehumanizing tool for Whitman, but a model of collective identity. Anatomical symmetry reveals our shared humanity” (39). In short, Tuggle argues that Whitman’s perseveration on and veneration of the body in poems such as “Song of Myself” and “I Sing the Body Electric” represents the amalgamation of the perspectives of the nineteenth-century anatomist and sentimentalist—an amalgamation that, when wedded with Whitman’s sense of egalitarianism, leaves him aspiring “to become a ‘resurrectionist’ in another, more democratic sense, absorbing and reviving the dead” in his work in a way not entirely dissimilar from the “grass” that he fetishizes so frequently in his poetry. Because Whitman fantasizes an ongoing connection with the dead, Tuggle also rightly reads his desire to connect with the dead as an act of melancholia—an unresolvable longing to recover an otherwise lost but desired object. As “both human remnant and anatomical object,” she argues, “the Whitmanian specimen [in successive editions of *Leaves of Grass*] emerges as a melancholically erotic relic that preserves enduring attachments” to those “‘he might have loved’” had he known them. The unknown dead that permeate the various passages of *Leaves of Grass* thus appear to owe their anonymity to Whitman’s appropriation of the resurrectionist’s proclivity for viewing the human body as anatomical specimen, albeit a specimen whose erotic potential is kept alive and made poetically powerful as a result of Whitman’s desire.

If medical science and the psychological phenomenon of mourning inform the representation of the dead in *Leaves of Grass*, they are even more central to Whitman’s response to the

Civil War—a war that forced, in Tuggle’s words, a “shrinking distinction between the human body as an object of mourning and a subject of scientific inquiry” (62-63). She charts this “shrinking distinction” in her second chapter through an examination of Whitman’s *Memoranda During the War* and John H. Brinton’s *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton, Civil War Surgeon, 1861-1865*. Brinton and Whitman sought to address the same questions, she argues, namely, what is the significance of all of this detritus of war—the broken bodies and countless dead—and what is one to do with it? For both Whitman and Brinton, Tuggle suggests, the answer was to be found in the creation of archives, literary or literal, that could incorporate that which the war threatened to elide. For Brinton the collection of specimens in Civil War hospitals was tied to the need to advance medical science—which he did by gleaning the amputated limbs and other human detritus that he and other surgeons like him produced while operating, and by locating that detritus in the Army Medical Museum where it could be studied to advance medical science. Curiously, the compulsion to collect and retain these otherwise macabre specimens also answered a cultural if not psychological need for the individuals who visited the museum—giving them a space in which to revisit, reclaim, or bear witness to the losses of war.

While Tuggle’s analysis of Brinton’s practice is of significant interest and value in its own right, even greater payoffs come when she turns to Whitman’s textual “collection” of specimen soldiers in *Memoranda During the War*, which gets the lion’s share of her attention in this chapter. Like Brinton, Whitman sought a way to collect and preserve the specimens he found in the Civil War hospitals, but this collection ultimately serves not the interests of science or a traumatized public so much as those of the traumatized poet himself. In her estimation, Whitman’s war work archives a collection that was deeply personal and was called into being by the psychic trauma that Whitman experienced as he witnessed and lamented the decline of so many bodies from vibrancy into death. For Tuggle, the “psychosomatic aftermaths of trauma” generated by his experiences in the hospitals drove the

production of *Memoranda During the War* and its attempts to “salvage the war’s ‘human fragments’” and “textually preserve ... [those] broken bodies” that Whitman loved and desired (63). Moreover, because psychosomatic trauma by nature persists, such a diagnosis, Tuggle explains, is why Whitman’s war poetry and prose was repeatedly “clustered, altered, or expelled” as *Memoranda During the War* transmuted into *Specimen Days & Collect*, and *Drum-Taps* was folded into *Leaves of Grass*: “Each incarnation of the war text is an act of incorporative mourning. The bloodstained original is absorbed into the latest work, slightly altered with each retelling . . . [and mirroring] the elusive magnetism of trauma” as it is perpetually replayed in new forms in the psyche of the afflicted. Her reading thus offers us a view of Whitman locked in a perpetual struggle to navigate the losses and traumas of the war, with the telling and retelling of these becoming a symptomatic expression of his melancholic inability to reconcile himself to them. It is a compelling vision of Whitman’s postbellum corpus, powerfully unsettling in its invitation to dwell in what Tuggle paints as unresolved—and seemingly unresolvable—grief.

The perpetually open psychological wound that Tuggle sees urging the various iterations of Whitman’s work is further illuminated by recurring to the experiences of the many amputees of the war, which is the subject of Chapter 3. Soldiers’ experiences of phantom-limb syndrome, as described by Silas Weir Mitchell, left them in a similar state where loss is perpetually experienced by virtue of the psychosomatic perception of that which is no longer there. As Tuggle describes it, “the phantom limb manifests as a physical presence felt most acutely in its absence,” a phenomenon which she asserts has its parallel in Whitman’s “melancholic drive to textually preserve specimens” (116). His desire for lost bodies, his “sustain[ed] attraction to the lost other,” can be best understood in the resonance that exists between this desire and the experience of those soldiers who themselves underwent amputation. The parallels between a soldier’s psychosomatic experience of a phantom limb and Whitman’s melancholic inscription of phantoms throughout his Civil War work thus casts

both amputee and Whitman in a similar light—with Whitman’s own wounds made visible in the phantoms that populate his work as “physical presence[s] felt most acutely in [their] absence,” not wholly unlike the soldiers whose limbs were experienced as perpetually present through their constant absence. Whitman, Tuggle thus demonstrates, did not escape the hospitals any less maimed than many of the soldiers he loved.

Whitman’s phantoms, appearing and reappearing throughout his postbellum archive, stand as testament to the enduring psychological wounds of war-time trauma—and, Tuggle argues in her fourth chapter, contributing to this repetition compulsion was Whitman’s flagging faith in the earth’s ability to perform a recuperative function of preserving and recycling the dead. Aware of corpses strewn across and sewn more or less deeply into the landscape, unearthed by everything from rain to rooting hogs, Whitman in his postwar editions of *Leaves of Grass* demonstrates, in Tuggle’s view, an inability “to find lasting resolution to his anxiety for the unknown and unburied.” Nowhere in her reading of Whitman’s work is this more apparent than in her treatment of Whitman’s magisterial elegy for Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Door Yard Bloom’d.” For her, the lilacs broken and made to festoon a coffin that will be entombed instead of interred suggest that neither flowers nor man appear poised to leaven a landscape already suffused with a superabundance of the dead. In this refusal to locate Lincoln within the earth, she argues, stands Whitman’s penultimate acknowledgment that the war has exceeded the earth’s “ecoerotic” ability to effectively house, preserve, and recycle the dead—further necessitating their surrogate incorporation into Whitman’s postbellum texts themselves.

Whitman’s skepticism regarding the earth’s incorporative faculties is at least partially the focus of her final chapter, as well. Here, Tuggle suggests that it is Whitman’s crisis of faith in the earth’s recuperative abilities that become the impetus for his refusal to make good on his promise in *Leaves of Grass* to “bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.” Rath-

er than undergo burial, Whitman, in a mystery that invites (and has invited much) commentary, built a rather imposing tomb for his remains. In an elegant bookend, Tuggle concludes her examination not only by offering up her explanation of Whitman's choice to be entombed, but also by analyzing how Whitman's body was subjected to the "anatomist's" knife—chronicling the event of his autopsy through the eyes and experience of Horace Traubel who attended it, and suggesting how that autopsy and the attendant parts of Whitman's corpse that it extracted and (unsuccessfully) preserved became the object of the medical practitioner and scientist's gaze. Macabre as such a scene may appear, in the light of Tuggle's narrative it ultimately seems rather fitting that Whitman's corpse should be as deeply marked as his literary corpus by medical science.

Because much of Tuggle's focus, and a good deal of Whitman's firsthand experience with medical science, centers on the Civil War period, it is fitting that Tuggle's most robust contributions are made when examining Whitman's experience, literary and otherwise, during this traumatic time. Previous scholars have recognized Whitman's proclivity for collecting "specimens" in his work, but Tuggle adds significantly to our understanding of this phenomenon when she identifies the resonances between Whitman's literary practice and that of Brinton in his creation of the American Medical Museum—both of which offer testimony to the anxieties and opportunities attending the trauma of war.

Additionally, while Tuggle is not the first to note a connection between Whitman's and Mitchell's understanding of the body, her amplification of the resonances that exist between Whitman's literary representation of phantom soldiers and Mitchell's documentation of phantom-limb syndrome adds a rich and unexpected interpretive register to the ghosts haunting Whitman's postbellum literary landscape. Triangulating these rewarding scholarly narratives through the lens of psychoanalytic theory seems, on its surface, to be appropriate, given the emphasis on mourning. However, despite Tuggle's efforts to

suggest that Whitman's melancholic and literary attachments to the dead are non-pathological, her reliance on a body of theory that is generally invested in the idea that melancholia is a subspecies of neurosis ultimately paints Whitman in a similar light. Consequently, his work appears here as the neurotic manifestation of an inability to recuperate from the trauma of war. To some degree, this may very well be the case, but, if so, one wonders how best to account for Whitman's more optimistic works—such as “Passage to India,” “To Think of Time,” “O Living Always – Always Dying!”—which were often clustered or annexed in combination with the darker Civil War poems but which seem to envision death as progressive and recuperative instead of a source of trauma and loss. On such poems, Tuggle is largely silent, and some commentary would have been most welcome. Such omissions notwithstanding, her work compellingly unearths the deep connections between Whitman's poetry, medical ideas and practice, and the experience of war. *The Afterlives of Specimens* is a significant scholarly contribution that will be of interest to Whitman scholars, medical humanists, Civil War historians, and scholars of nineteenth-century America more generally.

Florida Atlantic University

ADAM BRADFORD

