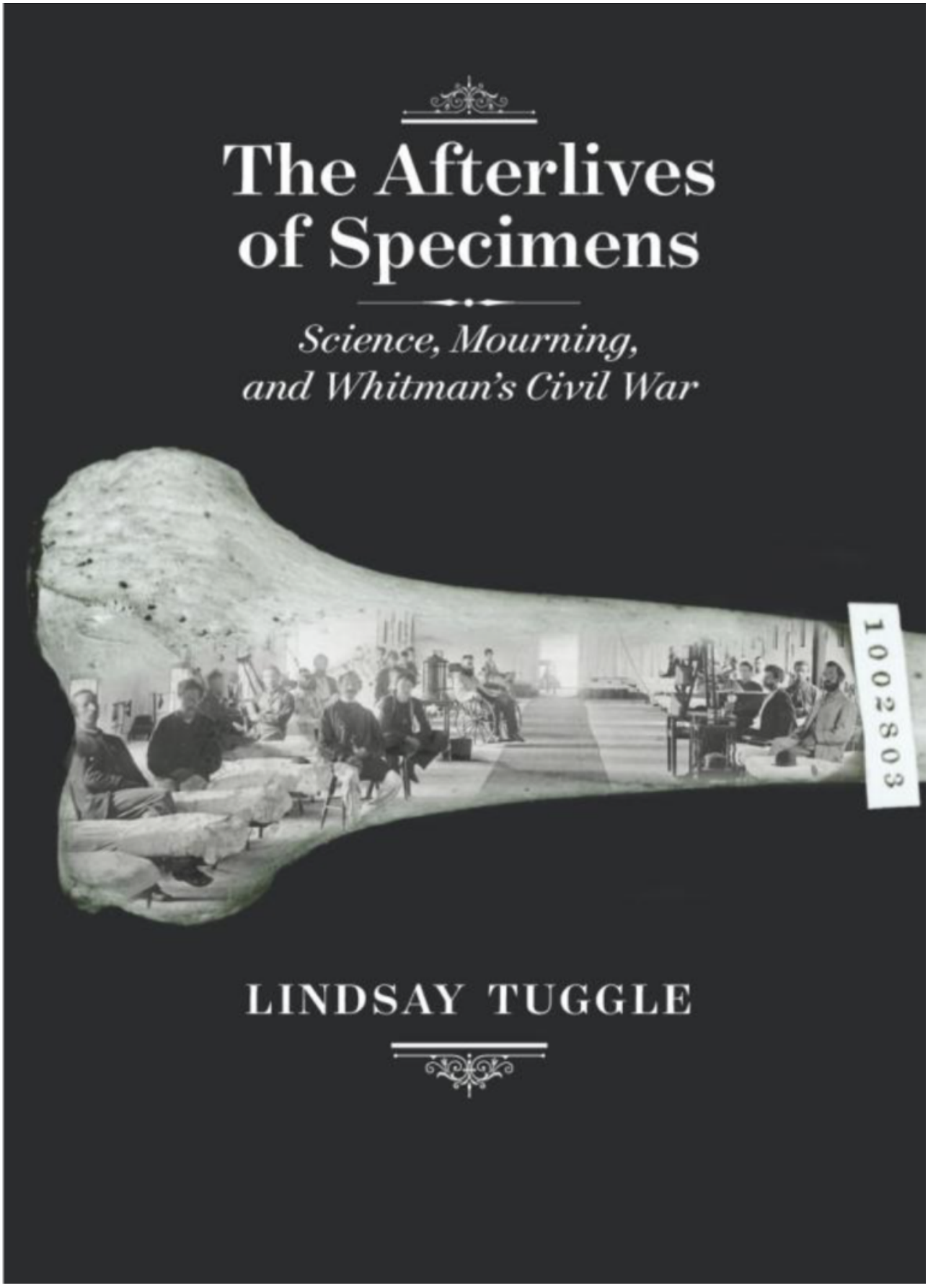
Other Methods of Seeing: Disability Ethics in Lindsay Tuggle’s The Afterlives of Specimens

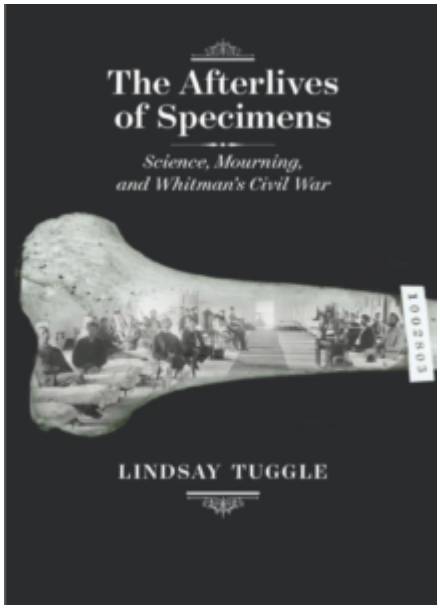


In *The Afterlives of Specimens,* literary critic and poet Lindsay Tuggle

excavates Whitman's Civil War writing to animate new readings of mourning and preservation in mid nineteenth-century America. In beautifully dense and multi-layered prose, she attends to the "specimen" (a term used in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, one year prior to its first appearance in *Leaves of Grass*) as a compelling category through which Whitman intimately observes death, uniting body with spirit. Tuggle is compelled by "specimen" not only because it is a term that frequents Whitman's writing but because it "encompass[es] nineteenth-century desires to collect and preserve rare, strange, or revered objects, both human and inhuman."[1] In a cultural moment marked by the dismemberment of the nation and its bodies, the "specimen" merges "scientific exploration" with "melancholic attachment."[2] Tuggle shows how an attention to body snatching, the human cadaver, and embalming practices reveals the making and unmaking of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, *Memoranda during the War* (1875), and *Specimen Days, and Collect* (1882).

Reviews of *The Afterlives of Specimens* have praised its interdisciplinary focus, specifically its attempt to place scientific discourse and authorship in conversation. Tuggle also moves effortlessly between psychoanalytic and queer theories—from Sigmund Freud to Judith Butler to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Given the focus of this special issue, I believe we can also position Tuggle's argument within a disability studies framework. From phantom limb syndrome to bodily and psychological traumas, her book offers a comprehensive account of Whitman's multi-varied relationship to disability. While the term "disability" does not appear in her book's chapters, Tuggle emphasizes Whitman's observance of wounds and illness as a volunteer at war hospitals as well as his firsthand experience with "war paralysis" and "hospital fatigue." While Whitman claims that "[d]uring the war [he] possess'd the perfection of physical health," he reveals the porosity of the body as the illnesses of his "comrades" reshape his sense of self and larger positioning within the U.S. body politic.[3]

Tuggle depicts a moment in U.S. history when disability became a fairly unremarkable phenomenon. Disability historian Kim Nielsen remarks that the Civil War "forced a rethinking of disability in the United States," in part because of the growth in photography, which visually depicted disabled soldiers in newspapers and other print publications.[4] In addition, the Invalid (or "one-armed") Corps, established in 1863 under President Lincoln, assigned disabled veterans to new labor tasks and gave even greater national visibility to the disabled veteran. Nielsen continues: "The war and its consequences generated new adaptive devices and medical advances—from the first wheelchair patent in 1869 to improved prostheses—that improved the lives of many, not just disabled veterans."[5]



Lindsay Tuggle, The Afterlife of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2017. 276 pp., $65.

The war was an event that disabled people, which—in turn—demanded innovation, not just at the level of early assistive technologies but also through literary forms. As the quintessential "poet of the body," Whitman aimed to depict these changing embodiments in his poems, notebooks, and letters.

While Whitman was intent on ensuring his afterlife with detailed postmortem instructions—regarding his autopsy, for instance—he was equally committed to preserving his own and soldiers' stories in the form of a book. *Drum-Taps* (Whitman's collection of Civil War poems, which would later be stitched into *Leaves of Grass*) thus becomes a "surrogate tomb" that incorporates now unnamed bodies, giving them space for circulation.[6] In one of her most virtuosic close readings of these poems, Tuggle shows how they encode nineteenth-century embalming practices—establishing a link between the preservation of bodies and of poems. Tuggle demonstrates how this "preservation compulsion" facilitates scenes of desire across the living and the dead.[7]

The Afterlives of Specimens compellingly reframes disability not as loss but as presence. From phantom limb syndrome, in which a missing arm or leg haunts its subject, to the preservation of dead bodies in the Army Medical Museum, Tuggle undermines the harsh distinctions established between ability and disability, life and death. Foregrounding the messy overlap between them, she presents impairment as life-affirming. At key moments, her analysis adopts a disability ethics, claiming the "specimen" not as a passive object but as a lively subject. Tuggle writes, "From his earliest war entries, Whitman insists that the body need not be whole, or even alive, in order to be adored."[8] She notes, for instance, that Whitman's poor health gave rise to *Leaves of Grass*, what he called his "consummated book." In the poet's own words, "I had to give up my health for it—my body—the vitality of my physical self." While Tuggle's

argument suggests Whitman's sacrificial offering of his body for his poems, she indicates that authorship is dependent upon disability. For the text to surface—or live beyond the moment of its composition—the body must, in other words, be impaired.

Elsewhere in the book, Tuggle directs readers to Whitman's paralysis following a series of strokes, which he experienced after leaving his work at the hospitals during the war. Even as Tuggle insists on Whitman's strength and optimism in the final decades of his paralysis, she distinguishes "regeneration" and "preservation" from the overcoming of disability.[9] Early scholarship in disability studies takes issue with so-called "overcoming narratives" because they privilege able bodies over disabled ones (the person who "overcomes" his or her disability is praised). However, as Tuggle notes, Whitman's insistence on "the afterlives of specimens" gives tribute to disabled people's experiences in the form of his writing. Rather than emphasize ability, Whitman's poems address what Robert Leigh Davis calls "partial recovery." Through the poet's effort to preserve the traces of men's impairment (most startlingly through the bloodstains that mark the pages of his hospital notebooks), Whitman is less intent on regenerating one's health than he is on preserving the presence of disability—or the body's partiality and halfness. Tuggle thus refutes the notion that disability is equated with loss. Both Whitman's own impairments and the impairments of those closest to him should not be mourned but given space and even celebrated.

In one of her most significant turns, Tuggle recasts the disabled soldier as an erotic subject. For instance, she argues that Whitman's *Memoranda* frames caretaking as a mode of queer desire. Pointing us towards the eroticization of impairment, she deprivileges the objectifying gaze ("specimen" is derived from the Latin verb conveying voyeurism, *specere*) to focus on the erotics of touch as an alternative—and more thoughtful—mode of engagement between bodies.

We might liken Tuggle's investment in the specimen with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of the politics of looking. While disabled bodies have been historically subject to staring as a mode of objectification, pity, and derision, Garland-Thomson makes an argument for recuperating visual recognition as an ethical act. When we foreground the perspective of the "staree" (that is, the individual being stared at) over the able-bodied "starer," an ethical stare emerges, which—in her words—"is a state of being arrested by and in thrall to the extraordinary."[10] In drawing on work by Susan Sontag and Elaine Scarry, Garland-Thomson notes "that staring between humans can be an ethically productive relationship only if the arrested stare transforms into an engaged rather than separated stare. Whether we are viewing human suffering or terrible human beauty, intense looking is a good thing when it promotes attentive identification between viewer and viewed."[11] She continues, "We might conclude then that ethical staring is a matter of beholding, of an arrested stare transforming into identification instead of differentiation."[12] Similarly, one senses in Tuggle's investment in the visual valences of the specimen a call "to behold." Tuggle extends Garland-Thomson's framework by attending to the

relationship between human and object or "specimen and collector."[13] The subjugated position of the object, or stare, assumes a place of power when we privilege the specimen alongside its observer.

Beyond its contribution to Whitman studies and the history of both science and medicine, Tuggle's book makes a profound contribution at the intersection of Whitman and disability studies. Rather than relying on contemporary definitions of disability, she offers readers a compelling portrait of what impairment looked like in the mid nineteenth-century U.S., both informed by and apart from medical discourse. In framing disability as a cultural (and not just scientific) phenomenon, she presents the injured and sick body as occasioning varied social experiences, which bring able-bodied and disabled figures into conversation. Given the field's more recent attempts to historicize disability prior to the Civil Rights Movement, it will behoove scholars of disability to turn to the rich pages of Tuggle's monograph to rethink and complexify the ways we define disability, both in Whitman's time and ours.

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[1] Tuggle, 1.

[2] Tuggle, 9.

[3] Tuggle, 105.

[4] Kim Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2013).

[5] Nielsen, 80.

[6] Tuggle, 150.

[7] Tuggle, 133.

[8] Tuggle, 71.

[9] Tuggle, 21, 45, 11.

[10] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Staring: How We Look (Oxford, 2009): 189.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Tuggle, 17.

This article originally appeared in issue 19.1 (Spring, 2019).

About the Author

Clare Mullaney is a visiting assistant professor of English at Hamilton College. She earned her Ph.D. in the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation, “American Imprints: Disability and the Material Text, 1858-1932,” considers how bodily and mental impairments—from eyestrain and word-blindness (the late nineteenth-century term for dyslexia) to war wounds, melancholy, and old age—transformed everyday practices of reading and writing.