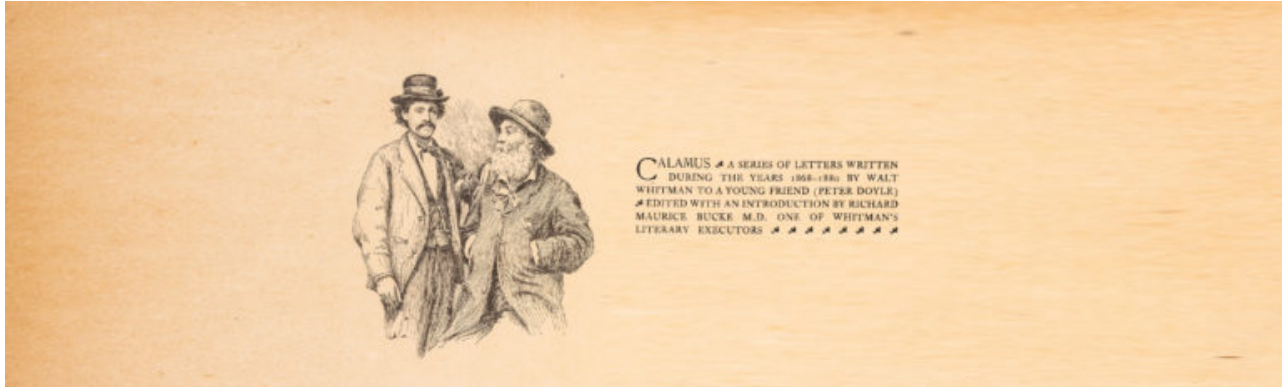


Convalescent Calamus: Paralysis and Epistolary Mobility in the Camden Correspondence with Peter Doyle



1. Dr. Quinn, *Medicine Woman*. Season 5, Episode 21. "The Body Electric." April 5, 1997, on CBS. 15:23. Center-left in this still from "The Body Electric," resort owner Preston A. Lodge III wears a black derby hat, black coat, black cravat, and white collared-shirt. Sandy-colored sideburns descend below his ears. His mouth is agape after hearing rumors of Whitman's sexuality from Dr. Andrew Cook, whose profile is foregrounded on the right.

In the fifth season of the CBS television drama *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998), starring Jane Seymour in the titular role, an episode titled "The Body Electric" opens with Walt Whitman (Donald Moffat) arriving in Colorado Springs for a week-long stay at the local "Springs Chateau and Health Resort."^[1] Historically, the episode's imagined detour through Dr. Quinn's orbit coincides with a trip the poet made out west in 1879. Whitman had experienced a major paralytic stroke in January 1873, after which he was diagnosed with hemiplegia on his left side. As he slowly recovered some mobility, he remained partially paralyzed and required the use of a cane for walking. In the episode, the owner of the health resort, Preston A. Lodge III (Jason Leland Adams), has promised the poet free room and board—a complimentary

Silas Weir Mitchell-inspired “rest cure”—in exchange for a poetry reading. “[H]e’s recovering from a stroke,” Preston announces to the townspeople, “and he’s chosen my resort to restore him to health.” Everything changes once rumors spread of the poet’s sexuality, and the episode transforms swiftly into a parable of tolerance. Being forewarned, the assigned physician, Dr. Andrew Cook (Brandon Douglas), cannot bring himself to shake Whitman’s hand. Later, in private, Andrew explains to Preston with earnest eyes, “Whitman is ... peculiar.” “Peculiar?” Preston asks. “A deviant,” Andrew clarifies. “A deviant?” Preston inquires, puzzled. Andrew breaks it down as plainly as he can muster: “He prefers the company of men, if you understand my meaning.” Preston is aghast (fig. 1). The poetry reading is cancelled. By the end of the episode, civility is restored when Dr. Quinn overcomes her own intolerance and decides to host the poetry reading herself. None other than Peter Doyle (Steven Culp), in from Washington to visit his “soulmate,” convinces Dr. Quinn her prejudices have been misguided. Most importantly, Seymour’s ever-judicious Dr. Quinn recognizes that Doyle has had a medicinal influence on the poet: where “electrotherapy, hydropathy, phrenology” and her “hot pepper ointment” have failed, the presence of the comrade has succeeded in making Whitman feel well (fig. 2).



2. Dr. Quinn, *Medicine Woman*. Season 5, Episode 21. “The Body Electric.” April 5, 1997, on CBS. 36:06. In the spare room Dr. Quinn has given Whitman and Doyle in her clinic, a nearly full profile of Whitman reclining on a bed is shown, his white beard hovering above his chest, his back propped up by pillows against the headboard. He laughs heartily as Doyle, seated behind the bed, reads something amusing. Both Whitman and Doyle wear white shirts and vests. Whitman wears a gray broad-brimmed hat. At right, Dr. Quinn has just entered through the doorway, where she observes the scene of their camaraderie.

This episode of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* directs attention to the intersection between disability and sexuality in Whitman’s life and writing, which became especially prominent from the Civil War onward. Certainly, “The Body Electric” derives plenty of plot from what Desiree Henderson has described as the episode’s epistemology of the closet, the “phenomenon of ‘outing,’” which promises viewer satisfaction via “the spectacle of revelation.”^[21] But “The Body Electric” also moves beyond this prepackaged plot. The dialogue gets a bit

heavy-handed here and there. "Have you been using the ointment?" Dr. Quinn asks Whitman in her clinic one day. "Mhmm," Whitman replies. He then seizes the moment to make his paralysis into a metaphor: "But some things cannot be altered, dear doctor; you must learn to accept them as they are." Overwrought as the dialogue may be, it accomplishes something scholarship on Whitman rarely has. When Preston cancels the poetry reading, he explains in a deliberate intermingling of references to the visitor's paralysis with rumors of his same-sex attraction, "I had no idea the extent of your infirmity, and I see now that a public reading would be all too taxing for you." When Whitman and Doyle are told they can no longer stay in the chateau, Dr. Quinn invites them to take a spare room in her clinic, instead, thus making the space of illness and medical care into a refuge for their sexual difference. Indeed, by its conclusion, the episode has nearly become a manifesto for the responsibility doctors have to educate themselves about and to adapt their practices to encompass queer health (fig. 3).^[3] These intertwined themes beg the question, why is it that scholarship has generally neglected to put Whitman's paralysis in direct dialogue with his literary representations of intimacy and eroticism, even as this intersection became central to his published writing, manuscripts, and correspondence?



3. Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman. Season 5, Episode 21. "The Body Electric." April 5, 1997, on CBS. 28:59. From inside the clinic, we see the back of Dr. Quinn's back and head as she opens the door after she has heard someone ring the doorbell. A long braid descends down her back. Inside the clinic we find the shadow of a lantern on a wooden dresser on the left, lace curtains attached to the open door on the right, and a wooden doorframe in the center. Outside the open door, Whitman appears in his gray hat, the collar of his shirt open and revealing a portion of his chest under his beard. Dr. Quinn has not yet invited him inside.

The neglect is not exclusive to Whitman. Popular media is conspicuously lacking when it comes to acknowledging the sexual lives and identities of people with disabilities. As Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow have observed, we live with regimes of sexuality that presume able-bodiedness to be requisite to the

experience of sex.^[4] We are told “the sexiest people are healthy, fit, and active: lanky models, buff athletes, trim gym members brimming with energy.”^[5] But even this description doesn’t quite do the matter justice. Popular media’s general reduction of the body to an object of capital-driven consumption has established, through assimilationist rhetorics of physical normalcy, a sexual imaginary disconnected from the diversity of human corporeality.^[6] It is significant to note (considering Whitman’s current legibility as a historical gay icon) that this has been true of mainstream gay male culture, too. Under these representational norms, people with disabilities tend to be either desexualized or, conversely, imagined to signify sexual excess (via the fetishizing of impairment, the pathologization of desire in the context of disability, or the conflation of illness with rhetorics of sexual culpability). Discussing this paradox, Mollow observes, “These contradictory constructions of disability create a double bind for people with disabilities: if disability can easily be interpreted as both sexual lack and sexual excess (sometimes simultaneously), then it seems nearly impossible for any expression of disabled sexuality to escape stigma.”^[7] *Dr. Quinn’s* dialogue illustrates this double bind: the line “I had no idea the extent of your infirmity” indicates both a negation of capacity and a euphemistic association of the paralyzed body’s capacity for desire with an unknowable “extent” of that body’s pathological state.

Whitman scholarship has sometimes contributed to these omissions. Consider, as an illustrative case, Gary Schmidgall’s biography *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*, which draws a stark line between Whitman’s sexuality in youth in New York and the life he led after his paralytic stroke. “[T]o all things, especially to an active sexual life, an end must come,” he writes.^[8] (As we will see below, this was not the case.) Of course, historically, Whitman’s writings have played a role as well. No text demonstrates this better than the 1858 series of fitness-advice articles published in the *New York Atlas*, discovered by Zachary Turpin in 2015, titled “Manly Health and Training: With Offhand Hints toward Their Conditions.”^[9] Published under the pseudonym Mose Velsor, “Manly Health and Training” promises to educate readers in those habits necessary to achieve what Manuel Herrero-Puertas describes as the fantasy of the herculean “good life”: in Whitman’s words, “a perfect body, perfect blood—no morbid humors, no weakness, no impotency or deficiency or bad stuff in him.”^[10] As Herrero-Puertas notes with a diachronic allusion to contemporary media, here we find Whitman’s Velsor avatar positioning himself as antebellum influencer, his column overflowing with banal advice and relentless enthusiasm.^[11]

And yet, taken as a whole, Whitman’s corpus quickly begins to unravel this antebellum, self-help iteration of what scholars and activists today understand to be an ideology of ability.^[12] The concept of disability was not available to Whitman in the way it is understood today, either as a capacious political category necessitating rights and protections or, in the context of critical theory, as an experience produced largely by structural barriers to access. Nevertheless, across the last three decades of his life especially, Whitman began to engage with and explore forms of disability in his writing. One of the

most illuminating representations of this turn appears in the way Whitman began to embrace his paralysis as part of his authorial persona after his stroke in 1873. Whitman used the term “disablement” to describe his physical state in the years that followed and began to redefine his sense of self through the lens of his paralysis. In manuscripts, published writing, and letters from the mid-1870s onward, we find Whitman beginning to refer to himself as a “half-paralytic” with striking constancy. “[H]alf-paralytic as I am,” he says as an aside to his friend John Burroughs in June 1879.^[13] During a trip to Niagara Falls in September 1880, Whitman would refer to himself as a half-paralytic in the conclusions to multiple letters back-to-back: “I am unusually well & robust for a half-paralytic–,” he writes to William Torrey Harris; “Am now pretty well for a half-paralytic,” he says to Frederick Locker-Lampson; and to Rudolf Schmidt, Whitman concludes the brief missive, “I am unusually well for a half-paralytic–.”^[14] Ed Folsom’s digital archive reveals seventeen transcribed letters to and from Whitman that use the word “paralytic” and another fifty-seven letters written by or to Whitman that reference his “paralysis” from 1873 onward. Combined with his prose and poetry, these letters show Whitman resolving to claim and even flaunt his paralysis as a critical feature of his celebrity.

Whitman’s move to incorporate his paralysis into a public identity shares a notable resemblance with the reclamation of “crip” in contemporary disability theory today. Crip theory provides a critical vocabulary for challenging what Robert McRuer has termed “compulsory able-bodiedness,” a term designating cultural pressures to self-present within standards of normative capability.^[15] One senses from these writings that Whitman would have felt a kinship with Nancy Mairs’s influential 1986 essay “On Being a Cripple.”^[16] Discussing her multiple sclerosis, Mairs famously asserts:

I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me...People–crippled or not–wince at the word ‘cripple,’ as they do not at ‘handicapped’ or ‘disabled.’ Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger.

Circulated among correspondents ranging from John Burroughs to Alfred, Lord Tennyson, letters and manuscripts show Whitman identifying as a half-paralytic to establish a comparable public consciousness of his changing body, his personal appearance, and his gait. His paralysis shaped his orientation toward his most intimate relationships, too.

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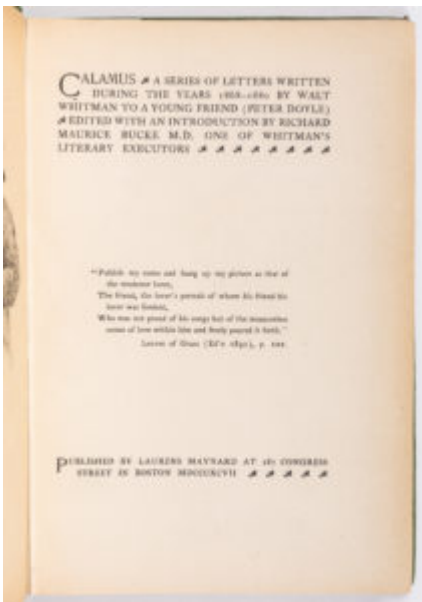
4. Spine of *Calamus: A Series of Letters Written during the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend* (Peter Doyle, . ed. R.M. Bucke (Boston, 1897). Spine features the title *Calamus* in gold lettering, then a line, then a version of the subtitle reading “Letters to Peter Doyle,” then another line, after which the name Walt Whitman appears above an image of phallic-shaped vegetation.

Much of my research in nineteenth-century American literature lies at the intersection of the medical humanities, sexuality studies, and historical understandings of illness and debility. In the spring of 2019, while conducting research at the American Antiquarian Society, I came across a book I had never held in person before. There are many writings in Whitman’s corpus that have the potential to change our perspective on how he understood the role of his paralysis in his relationships. This one was published in 1897, just five years after his death, by Whitman’s friend and disciple, Richard Maurice Bucke. Bucke (who alongside Horace Traubel and Thomas Harned served as one of Whitman’s literary executors) titled the book *Calamus*, a name taken from the sequence of poems in *Leaves of Grass* celebrating the expression of love between men, first appearing in the third edition printed by the publishing firm Thayer & Eldridge in Boston in 1860 (fig. 4). But the book is not a collection of those poems. Instead, as clarified by the subtitle “A Series of Letters Written during the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend,” the book features Whitman’s correspondence with Peter George Doyle, with whom Whitman developed a romantic friendship that would last from 1865 until the end of the poet’s life (fig. 5). The selected letters provide a biographical illustration of the kind of relationship Whitman intended to advocate in the “*Calamus*” cluster.

Bucke, a Canadian physician, became obsessed with the author of *Leaves of Grass* during the poet’s lifetime. The two met in 1877 and developed a friendship. Today, Bucke is best remembered as the author of a 1901 book called *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, where he proposes an evolutionary horizon for humanity characterized by the state of mind named in

his title. Superseding the mere “self-consciousness” of ordinary humans, “cosmic consciousness” describes a state where understanding of “the life and order of the universe” is attained, along with a “state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking and more important both to the individual and to the race than is the enhanced intellectual power.”^[17] A “sense of immortality” and fearlessness in the presence of death must likewise be present. According to Bucke, this cosmic consciousness describes a stage of evolution only a handful had reached by the twentieth century. Whitman was one of them. With ecstatic assuredness, Bucke asserts, “Walt Whitman is the best, most perfect, example the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense, first because he is the man in whom the new faculty has been, probably, most perfectly developed, and especially because he is, par excellence the man who in modern times has written distinctly and at large from the point of view of Cosmic Consciousness, and who also has referred to its facts and phenomena more plainly and fully than any other writer either ancient or modern.”^[18] Bucke even believed he could pinpoint the moment Whitman evolved. On an evening in 1866, an eye witness, Helen Price, recalled that Whitman began to emit a baffling luminescence over dinner: “a peculiar brightness and elation ... an almost irrepressible joyousness, which shone from his face and seemed to pervade his whole body ... I grew almost wild with impatience and vexation ... he did not utter a single word during the meal; and his face still wore that singular brightness and delight, as though he had partaken of some divine elixir.”^[19] Cosmic consciousness descended upon him that night.

Bucke didn't just want to be like Walt. He wanted to look like Walt, and he didn't do a shabby job of trying. An anecdote is appropriate here. In 2018, during a tour I organized for students at Swarthmore College of queer archives in Philadelphia, including the Walt Whitman Papers held at the Kislak Center for Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania, my students and I arrived shortly after Senior Curator Lynne Farrington had discovered an uncatalogued nineteenth-century photograph of a big-bearded man tucked away in one of the rare books.[20] The man appears seated outdoors, on a wooden chair mostly concealed, surrounded by vegetation and on the banks of a pond or lake (fig. 6). He holds a chipmunk on his raised right hand, a pose resembling the 1873 photograph Whitman appreciated of himself, holding a cardboard representation of a butterfly (fig. 7). In this case, one is left to speculate that the chipmunk has been preserved in its resting pose by taxidermy. “Who is this man whose pose parallels the author of *Leaves of Grass*?” students were invited to explore. By the end of our visit, Farrington had concluded: this was no Whitman photograph. This was Bucke. Better yet, this was Bucke in Whitman drag—what Farrington describes as the disciple's “hero worship,” donned in the classic form of flattery through imitation.



5. Frontispiece and title page for *Calamus: A Series of Letters Written during the Years 1868-1880* by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend (Peter Doyle), ed. R.M. Bucke (Boston, 1897). The frontispiece shows a drawing of Whitman and Doyle together, Doyle standing on the left, his hand loosely draped over Whitman's near shoulder, and looking at the viewer with a black derby hat, black mustache, three-piece suit, and a cravat. Whitman appears seated on the right, looking at Doyle, with a broad-brimmed hat, white beard, big coat buttoned-up, and his hands in his pockets. The caption reads, "Walt Whitman and Peter Doyle drawn by H.D. Young from a photograph taken by Rice at Washington, D.C., in 1869. On the title page, between title and publisher, an excerpt from "Calamus" is quoted: "Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover,/The friend, the lover's portrait of whom his friend his lover was fondest,/Who was not proud of his songs but of the measureless ocean of love within him and freely poured it forth."



6. Loose photograph of Richard Maurice Bucke, found tucked inside his book, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, 1901). Copy in the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, at the University of Pennsylvania. As noted in the essay, a big-bearded man appears seated outdoors, on a wooden chair mostly concealed, surrounded by vegetation and on the banks of a pond or lake, where he holds a chipmunk on his raised right hand.

The little-known *Calamus* book of letters adds dimension to our understanding of Bucke's interest in Whitman. One of the most important aspects is the attention Bucke gives Whitman's paralysis in his introduction. On the second page, we meet Whitman in the flesh, through the recollection Bucke gives of the first time he met the poet, in 1877. "It was one hot July day, the place of meeting, Camden, New Jersey," he writes.^[21] The setting was Whitman's brother George and sister-in-law Lou's three-story, red-brick house on 431 Stevens Street. Bucke was invited to wait for Whitman in a sitting room left of the entrance. Then he appeared: "I had only sat a few minutes in the darkened and comparatively cool room when Walt Whitman entered. He walked slowly leaning on a cane—his left leg, manifestly weaker than the right, making him quite lame. He was suffering from the paralysis mentioned in the letters."^[22] As Bucke goes on, his immediate attraction to the poet becomes evident: "He was a man of about six feet in height and weighing about two hundred pounds, erect, broad chested, dressed in a light gray suit—a white shirt with broad turned-down collar open at the throat and no necktie." "His lips" were "full and more expressive of tenderness than firmness."^[23] "His ruddy face, his flowing, almost white, hair and beard, his spotless linen, his plain, fresh looking gray garments, exhaled an impalpable odor of purity." Even Whitman's ears made an impression—ears "large, fleshy and extraordinarily handsome."



7. W. Curtis Taylor (Broadbent & Taylor), photographer, "Whitman with Butterfly, 1877." Albumen photograph frontispiece in sample proof of *Leaves of Grass*, 1891. Rare Books and Special Collections, Library of Congress. In this half-length portrait, Whitman is seated, facing left. He wears a hat and sweater and looks at the cardboard butterfly he is holding.

Shortly after, the introduction gives way to a twelve-page interview with Doyle about his relationship with Whitman, including the famous scene of their meeting on a streetcar, where Doyle worked as a conductor at the age of twenty-two. "We were familiar at once—I put my hand on his knee—we understood. He did not get out at the end of the trip—in fact went all the way back with me....From that time on we were the biggest sort of friends."^[24] The interview progresses through later scenes as well: receiving and losing a manuscript copy of *Drum-Taps* Whitman had given him as a present, nursing Whitman in Washington in the early months of 1873 following his stroke, and regretting that he did not find more opportunities to see his friend in Camden during the last few years of his life. From here, the book opens onto surviving letters Whitman sent Doyle from 1868 to 1880—letters Doyle had provided and permitted Bucke to transcribe for publication. More than a third show Whitman describing his paralysis, chronic symptoms, and details of what he calls in his writing his "convalescent hours,"^[25] alongside expressions of his affection for Doyle and, following his move to Camden, his wish to be with him again.

There is an undeniable voyeurism to the book. Bucke's triangulated preoccupation with the friendship between Whitman and Doyle, paired with the interpretive *raison d'être*—the idea that the book will grant readers access to the meaning of "Calamus"—makes it one of the queerest books of the nineteenth century (a superlative for which there is seemingly infinite competition, as Christopher Looby and Natasha Hurley have demonstrated). As editor, Bucke surrenders to an idealized love whose advocate has passed, a nostalgic, erotic fixation comparable to the method of remembering that Christopher Hanlon has described as characteristic of Whitman's mental wanderings.^[26] Even Horace

Traubel thought the idea for the book strange. Curious to know Bucke's investment, Traubel asked, "Of what use are they?" and "Do you think Walt, if he were here, if he could be asked, would be willing?"^[271] In these questions, Traubel insinuates the sensitive nature of the correspondence.

To be sure, the book registers the debate Michael Warner and Peter Coviello have examined about whether Whitman should be read as a gay poet or "early" in relation to that twentieth-century identity category.^[281] By 1880, Bucke had known about and planned to do something with the correspondence. In a letter from that year dated June 6, Bucke disclosed to a British editor, "[Pete] and Walt love one another (as far as I can make out) much more than father and son can love one another—this man has had letters from Walt for 15 years, and of course has saved them all,—he had a trunk full of them, these letters I hope to get—he will send them to me and I shall keep them as long as I like—I hope to make a long chapter of extracts from them."^[291] Bucke received the letters from Doyle later that year. During the fifteen years that elapsed prior to their publication, the letters passed into the hands of a number of interested parties, among them a disciple hailing from Bolton, Lancashire, James W. Wallace, who visited Bucke for a month in 1891 and obtained a transcription of the correspondence while there. Wallace, in turn, shared the letters with the British intellectual and historian of same-sex eroticism John Addington Symonds, who had long devoted himself to discerning the meaning of the relationships depicted in "Calamus." Correspondence reveals that these early readers looked to the letters for what they could reveal about the "manly love" Whitman advocated in *Leaves of Grass*. Potential editors perceived this dimension, too. In 1895, in the process of seeking a publisher, Bucke notes in a letter to Wallace on October 30, "I have made the Peter Doyle letters into a book. I sent MS to Kegan Paul Truber & Co. to look at—their reader thinks very meanly of the letters and advises against publication."^[301] The next year, Edward Carpenter, another friend of Whitman's who became an increasingly public advocate for same-sex love, advised Bucke plainly in 1896 that there was "no chance" a London publisher would take it, due to the "unheard of nature of the contents."^[311]

His voyeurism notwithstanding, Bucke ultimately presents the Whitman-Doyle relationship as an exceptionally transcendent form of an otherwise normal phenomenon: the romantic, same-sex friendship characteristic of nineteenth-century life, which, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg famously demonstrates in her analysis of women's letters, became normalized for men and women alike through the bourgeois ideology of "separate spheres" gender segregation. However, on an introductory page, Bucke has also included a long quote from Symonds who had by this time become known for his writing on same-sex eroticism, through works such as *A Problem in Modern Ethics: Being an Inquiry into The Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion* (first printed in 1883) as well as the book *Sexual Inversion*, coauthored with Havelock Ellis, which appeared in German in 1896 and in English in 1897. In this quote, taken from Symonds's 1893 book *Walt Whitman—A Study*, we find the author carefully honoring the import of the Whitman-Doyle relationship as he understands it: "The letters breathe a purity and simplicity of

affection, a naïveté and reasonableness, which are very remarkable considering the unmistakable intensity of the emotion." Critics took note of the book's significance to understanding the meaning of "Calamus." As one writer for the *New York Evening Post* wrote on July 7, 1897, "There was something in that section of Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' called 'Calamus' which troubled Symonds not a little, so suggestive was it of a certain aspect of Greek life with which Symonds had acquainted himself painfully in his studies made for his 'Greek Poets.'" Taking all of these interlocutors into consideration, Artem Lozynsky concludes in his 1979 analysis of the book: "It is valid...to see Bucke's *Calamus* as an attempt by an American disciple to deal with the question of Whitman's homosexuality."^[32]

And yet, this is clearly not the only subject the 1897 *Calamus* explores. Thus, I want to ask: what might come of decentering the focus on the question of gay historiography to recognize the more fundamental intersection the book explores between desire and disability? We should note that Bucke was no stranger to impairment. In 1857, on a mining expedition in the mountains of California, Bucke, then a prospector, found himself and his partner, Allen Grosh, overwhelmed by a winter storm at the edge of Lake Tahoe. As one nineteenth-century writer describes the event, the storm "obliterated the trail, buried the surrounding mountains under deep snow-drifts, and hemmed them in by their solitary camp-fire."^[33] Provisions had run out. Another storm came, leaving snow so soft their snowshoes became unusable. When at last they found rescue, it was too late for his companion. Grosh died shortly after. As for Bucke, one of his feet was so badly frostbitten it needed to be amputated at the ankle. A portion of his other foot was amputated as well. As the historian quoted above concludes the account, "He reached the hospitable door of Alpheus Bull, in San Francisco, hobbling on his bandaged stumps, and by Mr. Bull's assistance he was carried to his home in Canada, from whence, on recovering health, he went to Europe to pursue studies in medicine."^[34] When we understand that Bucke, like Whitman, required the use of a cane and walked with difficulty, this triangulated spectatorship takes on added significance. The volume adapts the calamus metaphor to represent what disability theorist Tobin Siebers has called a "sexual culture for disabled people": a culture built around the divergent vectors of access and sites of erotic experience that unfold in the context of disability. Perhaps no element of the book better prepares us to inhabit this culture than an early sign of Bucke's investigative sleuthing: a transcription he makes in the first pages of *Calamus* of a note Whitman wrote to Doyle inside a gift copy of his 1882 autobiography *Specimen Days, and Collect*. Written on a flyleaf, in a dedication from June 1883, the note recalls how their relationship deepened following his stroke, as his mobility changed:

Pete do you remember—(of course you do—I do well)—those great long jovial walks we had at times for years (1866-'72) out of Washington City—often moonlight nights, 'way to "Good Hope"; or, Sundays, up and down the Potomac shores...Or during my tedious sickness and first paralysis ('73) how you used to come to my solitary garret room and make up my bed, and enliven me and chat for an hour or so—or perhaps go out and get the medicines Dr. Drinkard

had order'd for me^[351]

Both in its form and content, this transcribed inscription sets the tone for the relational modes the book will illustrate. In following the traces of the palpable curatorial hand that assembled the selected letters as a relic of an erotics of paralysis, readers likewise find themselves implicated as participants within the culture of desire and interpretation depicted.

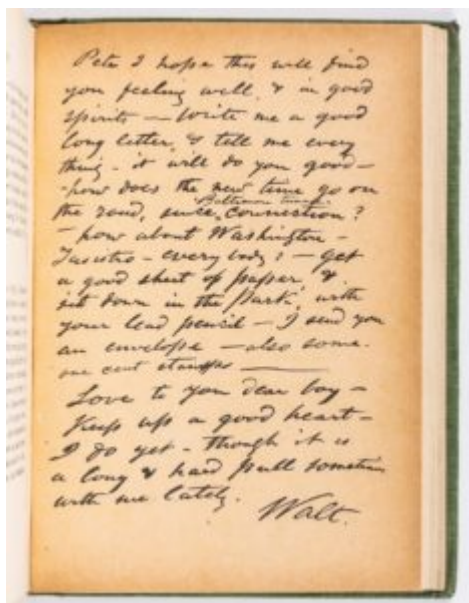
The letters Whitman wrote Doyle after his stroke deserve greater scholarly attention. Some are concise, suggesting exhaustion on Whitman's part, such as the three-sentence letter he wrote on his fifty-fourth birthday, eight days after his mother's death in Camden. He writes Peter to let him know he hopes to return to Washington on June 2. "Come up Tuesday," he tells him. "I am about the same as to my sickness—no worse." On June 18, when he moved into his brother and sister-in-law's house in Camden for good, he wrote Peter again: "It has been a good move of me coming here as I am pleasantly situated, have two rooms on 2nd floor, with north and south windows, so I can have the breeze through." In that letter he feels well enough: "Nothing very new—I have had some bad feeling in the head yesterday afternoon and this morning—but it will pass over no doubt."

In a majority of these letters, we find Whitman integrating a reflection on his uncertain state of health with an expression of his desire to be with Peter again. "I think about you every night—" he says on July 7, 1873.

I reproach myself that I did not fly around when I was well, and in Washington, to find some better employment for you—now I am here, crippled, laid up for God knows how long, unable to help myself, or my dear boy.—I do not miss anything of Washington here, but *your visits*—if I could only have a daily visit here such as I had there—I go out very little here—there is not much convenience here, for me to go out—

"Unable" to "go out—," Whitman's letters go out on his behalf. Similarly, Doyle's correspondence begins to function as a surrogate mode of visitation. These epistolary visits did not satisfy either of them completely. On July 24, 1873, Whitman wrote with evident discouragement: "Pete, as I have told you several times, I still think I shall get over this, and we will be together again and have some good times—but for all that it is best for you to be prepared for something different—my strength can't stand the pull forever, and if continued must sooner or later give out—Now Pete, don't begin to worry boy, or cry about me, for you haven't lost me yet and I really don't think it is likely yet—" But even in these moments of heightened uncertainty, the letters succeed in attaining an alternative textual mobility, transporting a material representation of the body of the lover back within the receiver's reach. As if intent on recovering the material effect of this missive-driven consummation, Bucke's edition includes a reproduction of one of the letters from 1873, showcasing the poet's impressively legible penmanship and his predilection for long, extenuating dashes (fig. 8). This letter even creates the conditions for

its reply. “[G]et a good sheet of paper,” the letter directs, “& sit down in the park, with your lead pencil—I send you an envelope—also some one cent stamps—.” Taken as a whole, this Whitman-Doyle correspondence offers a nineteenth-century, sickroom-stationed correlate to what Mia Mingus has described as “access intimacy,” meaning “that elusive, hard to describe feeling”—the “eerie comfort,” “the way your body relaxes and opens up”—“when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.”^[36]



8. Calamus: A Series of Letters Written during the Years 1868-1880 by Walt Whitman to a Young Friend (Peter Doyle), ed. R.M. Bucke (Boston, 1897): 112. This reproduction comes from a letter dated July 7, 1873. It reads: “Pete I hope this will find you feeling well, & in good spirits—Write me a good long letter, & tell me every thing—it will do you good—how does the new time go on the road, since Baltimore tunnel connection?—how about Washington—Tasistro—everybody?—get a good sheet of paper, & sit down in the park, with your lead pencil—I send you an envelope—also some one cent stamps—
Love to you dear boy—
Keep up a good heart—
I do yet—though it is a long & hard pull sometimes with me lately. Walt.”

What would it mean to understand these convalescent letters as necessary to our understanding of the meaning of “Calamus”? What would shift in our reading of the Calamus poems if we understood their significance to be indivisible from the epistolary mobility Whitman utilized in the context of his paralysis? Moreover, how might Whitman’s erotics of paralysis impel us to narrate histories of same-sex love and friendship differently? What might change in the way we conceptualize queer historiography once we’ve encountered the many writings Whitman used to incorporate a paralytic identity into his poetics of comradely love?

On May 3, 2019, the social media icon and gay disability advocate Carson Tueller published a reflection on the intersection between his quadriplegia,

following a spinal cord injury, and sexuality on his Instagram account. “Can you get it up? Does it work?” he begins, ventriloquizing two questions he has been asked by strangers “a lot.”^[37] Tueller takes these questions as an opportunity to address what they reveal about the people who ask them and the misconceptions they betray. “[B]eneath them,” he writes,

I found a narrow, limited idea of what pleasure, sexuality, and intimacy were. Having a spinal cord injury has taught me that intimacy is far more dynamic, flexible, and varied than most of us know or think. Disabilities are helpful in this regard. They help challenge our understanding and assumptions of what pleasure and sex should look like, and open a new paradigm of unanswered questions and infinite exploration...Our understanding of sex will remain incomplete and limited as long as disabled bodies are misunderstood and desexualized.

Later, referring to an artfully cropped picture of himself in the nude in his wheelchair, which he has paired with the post, Tueller goes on:

I can't feel most of what you see in this picture. As delicate as it is to mention, sex and intimacy are different for me than they were before I was paralyzed. But there are some sexual abilities that came along with my spinal cord injury that were not available to me as an 'able-bodied' man. You might say that paralysis gave me some sexual superpowers.

The *Calamus* of 1897 is best encountered as a testament to a shared consciousness. The epistolary mobility it recollects and reenacts challenges our understanding and assumptions of what pleasure and sex should look like. The letters expose how, without Whitman's post-1873 writings, our understanding of the “Calamus” poems remains deprived of the vectors of access by which its imagined intimacies were attained.

Acknowledgments

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[1] *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Season 5, Episode 21. “The Body Electric.” April 5, 1997, on CBS.

[2] Desiree Henderson, “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman and the Prime-Time ‘Outing’

of Walt Whitman." *Walt Whitman Quarterly* 17.1 (Summer 1999): 69-76. p. 71. As Henderson goes on to note, the episode's representation of euphemism and silence around sexuality is one of its most interesting aspects. In Henderson's words, the "proliferation of speech about Whitman's sexuality is actually empty of speech, as the dialogue is masked with music. For example, the moment that Dr. Quinn finally hears the 'truth' about Whitman, we simply see another character lean in and whisper in her ear. It is her facial expression of shock and surprise that confirms the revelation." In turn, "the characters' silence calls the audience into the secret—we must understand the nature of the revelation to read the silences" (72).

[3] For a contemporary resource on this subject, see the Lambda-award-winning anthology *The Remedy: Queer and Trans Voices on Health and Health Care* (2016), edited by Zena Sharman. A call to action and advocacy on behalf of queer and trans health care, *The Remedy* reminds its readers that the LGBTQ community has a deep tradition of shaping the care they receive: "We make do and we re-make. We crowdsource our health in a community with a long history of caring for one another outside of and often in spite of dominant systems and structures. We document and gather and share information, filling the gaps in the evidence where our lives, needs, and identities are increasingly but still insufficiently visible. We tell stories, and we take care of each other." *The Remedy: Queer and Trans Voices on Health and Health Care*. Ed. Zena Sharman. (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016). Kindle, p. 16.

[4] Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, "Introduction." *Sex and Disability*. Eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012): 1-36.

[5] McRuer and Mollow, 1.

[6] For recent scholarship that adds an important dimension to questions of representation, technology, and disability, see a recent special section titled "Crip Technoscience" in *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*. Authors of the introduction to the issue use the concept of "crip technoscience" as an analytic to "name[] historic and contemporary practices of anti-assimilationist disability making and knowing." Kelly Fritsch, Aimi Hamraie, et al. "Introduction." Special Section: Crip Technoscience. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*. Vol. 5, No. 1 (2019): 1-10. pp. 1-2; 3.

[7] Anna Mollow, "Is Sex Disability?: Queer Theory and the Disability Drive." *Sex and Disability*. Eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012): 285-312. p. 286.

[8] Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*. (New York: Dutton Adult, 1997): 138. In one remarkable formulation, Schmidgall proposes that even before his stroke we may credit Whitman's move to serve at Washington's military hospitals during the Civil War not just to his Union patriotism or "concern for his wounded brother George" but also to a growing sexual exhaustion. Schmidgall clarifies, "I suspect that a desire to get away to the more sexually calm"

environment of the hospital wards “may also have played a part.” Any reader of *Drum-Taps* (1865) learns quickly enough that erotic hibernation did not characterize the friendships Whitman formed as a wartime nurse. Nevertheless, far beyond Schmidgall’s biography, these ideas remain common in Whitman scholarship.

[9] For a study of the relationship between “Manly Health and Training” and the self-help genre it aspires to imitate, see Jess Libow, “Song of My Self-Help: Whitman’s Rehabilitative Reading.” *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2019).

[10] Manuel Herrero-Puertas, “Whitman’s Good Life.” *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*. Vol. 19. No. 1 (Spring 2019).

[11] For a brilliant discussion of another, related Whitman avatar, the “Good Gray Poet” moniker solidified by Whitman’s friend William Douglas O’Connor in the 1866 pamphlet he used to vindicate Whitman after he was fired from his government job for the alleged indecencies of *Leaves of Grass*, see Sari Edelstein’s essay, “‘Now I Chant Old Age’: Whitman’s Geriatric Vistas.” *Revisiting the Whitmanian Body at 200: Memory, Medicine, Mobility*, Special Issue of *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*, Eds. Don James McLaughlin and Clare Mullaney, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2019). Here Edelstein observes the way age discourse was used to alleviate concerns about the poet’s sexuality. “Significantly,” Edelstein writes, “this image invokes Whitman’s experience as a war nurse to cast him in the role of benevolent old man—that is, O’Connor essentially rebrands Whitman through age discourse, relying on the cultural assumption that old age and sexuality are incompatible, even unthinkable, together.”

[12] It is important to acknowledge that both of the concepts I am interested in here, disability and sexuality, are historically situated and do not mean the same thing from one context to the next. Thus, I want to take care to unfold their meanings as Whitman, his editors, and his readers understood them. Consider, as one interesting example, Whitman’s recorded assertion from April 20, 1888, in Horace Traubel’s *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, published in 1906, that Emerson believed *Leaves of Grass* would reach a larger audience were it not for the book’s “sex handicap.” In this context, the implication is not that Whitman’s homosexuality is the problem, but rather that *Leaves of Grass*’s explicit references to sexuality (as depicted between men and women especially) have begun to distract from the book’s other meanings. Moreover, the word “handicap” had not yet acquired its widespread twentieth-century association with disability. In the nineteenth century, handicap was used to designate weight added to a horse in a horse race, to create an equalizing disadvantage. Nonetheless, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records an instance of the word being used metaphorically in relation to deafness in 1888. In this example and across this piece, my goal is to address these subjects according to the complexity of their usage in the sources discussed.

[13] Walt Whitman to John Burroughs, 11 June [1879]. June 11, 1879.
whitmanarchive.org

[14] Walt Whitman to William Torrey Harris, 28 September 1880, September 28, 1880; Walt Whitman to Frederick Locker-Lampson, 28 September 1880, September 28, 1880; Walt Whitman to Rudolf Schmidt, 28 September 1880. September 28, 1880. whitmanarchive.org

[15] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

[16] Nancy Mairs, *Plaintext* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986).

[17] Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901): 2

[18] Bucke, 186-7.

[19] Bucke, 195.

[20] Loose photograph. Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901). Copy in the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, at the University of Pennsylvania.

[21] *Calamus*, 10.

[22] *Calamus*, 10. The cane Bucke saw in person was quite likely the one given to Whitman by Doyle as a gift following the stroke of 1873. For a game-changing essay on the significance of the canes Whitman kept over the course of his life, see Bethany Schneider's essay "Whitman's Cane." *Revisiting the Whitmanian Body at 200: Memory, Medicine, Mobility*, Special Issue of *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*, Eds. Don James McLaughlin and Clare Mullaney, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2019).

[23] *Calamus*, 11.

[24] *Calamus*, 23.

[25] Walt Whitman, "How I Get Around at 60, and Take Notes, No. 2." *The Critic* (April 9, 1881).

[26] Christopher Hanlon, "Whitman's Wandering Mind." *Revisiting the Whitmanian Body at 200: Memory, Medicine, Mobility*, Special Issue of *Common-place: The Journal of Early American Life*, Eds. Don James McLaughlin and Clare Mullaney, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2019).

[27] *Calamus*, 21.

[28] For Warner's discussion of Whitman's attraction to the phrenological

concept of adhesiveness, see his introduction to *The Portable Whitman*. Ed. Michael Warner. (New York: Penguin, 2003) For Coviello's call to recognize the differences in sexual experience prior to the rise of a modern sexological taxonomy, see *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York University Press, 2013.

[29] Richard Maurice Bucke, Letter to Harry Buxton Forman, June 6, 1880. June 6, 1880. D. B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. Quoted in Artem Lozynsky. "What's in a Title? Whitman's 'Calamus' and Bucke's 'Calamus.'" *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1979): 475-488. p. 476.

[30] Richard Maurice Bucke, Letter to J. W. Wallace, October 30, 1895. October 30, 1895. County Borough of Bolton, England, Public Libraries. Quoted in Artem Lozynsky. "What's in a Title? Whitman's 'Calamus' and Bucke's 'Calamus.'" *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1979): 475-488. p. 482.

[31] Edward Carpenter, Letter to Richard Maurice Bucke, January 16, 1896. January 16, 1896. D. B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada. Quoted in Artem Lozynsky. "What's in a Title? Whitman's 'Calamus' and Bucke's 'Calamus.'" *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1979): 475-488. p. 476.

[32] Lozynsky, 486.

[33] Eliot Lord, *Comstock: Mining and Miners*. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883): 30.

[34] Lord, 32.

[35] *Calamus*, iii.

[36] Mia Mingus, "[Access Intimacy: The Missing Link](#)." *Leaving Evidence*. May 5, 2011.

[37] @carson_tueller, Instagram, May 3, 2019.

Further Reading

For an excellent book on the subject of disability and sexuality, see Jane Gallop's recent psychoanalytically inflected work, *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Durham, N.C., 2019). I also recommend teaching the Whitman-Doyle correspondence in dialogue with the "Calamus" sequence of *Leaves of Grass*, a reproduction of which can be accessed [here](#). Letters can also be accessed independently at whitmanarchive.org.

www.whitmanbicentennialessays.com

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