Journal of American Studies of Turkey
39 (2014): 89-112

Re-Writing the Eugenic Whitman in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days (2005)*

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"I loafe and invite my soul" Whitman, Song of Myself," 22[1]

"I have a sense of a missing part. Some sort of, I don't know. Engagement. Aliveness. Catareen calls it stroth." (Cunningham, *Specimen Days*, 307)

"The third distinction is a subset of the second: the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us […] Cyborgs are ether, quintessence." (Haraway 153)

Walt Whitman's poetry and essays weave complex rhetorical links between American nature, the human body, and democracy.[2] At the conclusion of his autobiographical collection of prose, *Specimen Days* (1882), Whitman lucidly cemented these links in an essay titled "Nature and Democracy—Morality." The poet, "before departure," emphasized his belief that democracy, "as manifested in the grand races of mechanics and work people," needs to be recharged, "fibred, vitalized, by regular contact with out-door light and air and growths, farm-scenes, animals, fields, trees, birds […]" (200). As Carolyn Sorisio has argued, Whitman's "faith in the inevitable realization of democracy on the continent, and his idealization of Americans as a new, healthy, vital race" intersected, and formed his "most

1 All parenthetical notations for "Song of Myself" refer to page numbers in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, cited in full in the bibliography. The other Whitman poems have been reached online at The Walt Whitman Archive, www.whitmanarchive.org, a site that does not list line or page numbers.

2 The author would like to thank Wai Chee Dimock for her sagacious advice on this paper.

cherished convictions" (174). Therefore, it is not surprising that *Specimen Days* ends with their reiteration – the physical specimens (of young men, of trees, of birds) shared with the reader in the poet's vignettes had been coding for this political lesson all along.

This article considers the revisions Whitman's equation between reproductive health, America, and democratic utopia undergo in *Specimen Days*, the 2006 novel by Michael Cunningham. Cunningham rewrites the threefold Whitmanesque connection between body, nature and American democracy for a post-natural, post-humanist, and post-national and visibly anti-democratic world. Instead of remaining a decline narrative, *Specimen Days* ends with the journey of a group of misfits to an unknown planet and the search for a new democratic utopia realized despite (perhaps even because of) physical and reproductive imperfections.

By problematizing Whitman's essentialist treatment of the body through a cyborg character called Simon, Cunningham relocates democracy in the intangible yearning for change and connection, divorcing it from virility and heterosexual procreation as well as from American exceptionalism. He takes seriously Donna Haraway's suggestion of the figure of the cyborg as an "imaginary resource" against the essentialisms that dominate American feminisms as well as colonial, racist, and patriarchal political formations. The cyborg, which "skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense," becomes the perfect node through which Cunningham re-writes Whitman (151). Instead of simply dismissing the eugenically-minded Whitman, however, the twenty-first century *Specimen Days* works as a paean to the poet's most expansive and freeing moments; central to this re-working is the multivalent figure of Whitman himself, as an antecedent and a cultural icon.

Building the Persona, Inheriting Whitman's Selves

Walt Whitman's main theme, as Jimmie Killingsworth tells us in "Tropes of Selfhood," was simply "myself" (39). It was also complexly "myself," since the persona that is projected in his poetry is multifaceted and deeply fractured. There are many rhetorical splits and reunions between the body and the soul in *Leaves of Grass*; the primary split occurs

even before the manuscript begins, however, between the printer of the book (Walter Whitman) and the persona that seems to speak through it (Walt Whitman). In his introduction to the 1959 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Malcolm Cowley describes two Whitmans -- a "Walter Whitman" who copyrighted the book, and "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" who is presented as the central figure of the book: "A reader might infer that Walter Whitman is the journeyman printer who became a hack journalist, then a newspaper editor *before being lost to sight*; whereas Walt Whitman is the workingman of the portrait and the putative author – but actual hero – of this extraordinary book" (viii, italics added).

Whitman's poetic project begins with a fractured and constantly uniting vision of the poet's self and persona, moving through stanzas in variations, like pieces of a puzzle. The tension between artistic invisibility, through which the author becomes the objective diagnostician of visual phenomena, and aesthetic visibility, in which the persona is foregrounded as a physical "specimen," can be found in the engraving of Whitman, printed as the frontispiece to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. A sketch of the poet, wearing clothes of a day laborer, is depicted as if he is emerging from pure ether. With no backdrop except for a few shades surrounding the central figure, the reader's eyes follow the chiaroscuro effect that begins with the dark, slanted hat, the piercing eyes, the beard, the dark belt and ends as the poet's legs fade into his shadow. Whitman appears as a figure in transition, either materializing from the top down or disappearing from the bottom up. Or perhaps the sketch depicts two Whitmans: the visually striking working-class subject of this engraving and the invisible artist of the image.

This bifurcation is also played out in many variations in "Song of Myself" as "I" and "myself" are continually split into subject and object and rhetorically sutured together:

> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
>
> Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
>
> Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
>
> Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
>
> Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it. (24)

In this stanza, the speaker of "Song of Myself" observes his subject, "what I am," with a detached, objective, and meticulous eye through the passage of time. Every line provides more physical detail about the subject until we are allowed to penetrate the physical and enter the subject's mind. The persona here first "stands"; then, we are told that he "stands amused." His actions are reported with a journalistic tone reminiscent of Whitman's nature notes in *Specimen Days*, such as the passage in which he describes sitting under a tree and observing, "birds, darting, whistling, hopping, or perch'd on trees" (100). Similarly, the poet seems to have very little control of the apparently arbitrary movements of the animated specimen ("what I am") -- yet, both the poet and the reader are very close to him in time. Every time the specimen takes a different posture, we are immediately apprised of the change in detail, with only a comma to mark the transition. The split between the subject and the object gets narrower and narrower until the final stanza, "both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it," unites the subject of the poem with the speaker. "Watching and wondering," after all, is exactly what the speaker himself had been doing. This union between the persona, Walter Whitman, and the reader is repeated structurally and semantically in much of Whitman's poetry. As the conflation of the persona's imagined body with the author demonstrates, Whitman imagined this emergent self as essential to his poetic and political project.

Central to this self-constitution is how the initial split allows one Walt Whitman to disappear while another is reconstructed as boldly embodied. The latter -- a virile, independent individual -- is the politico-biological Adam serving as both the metonym and the foundation of American democracy in much of Whitman's poetic and prose output. As the poet observed in "One's Self I Sing," "a simple separate person" is expected to "utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." The "specimen" thus forged is both typical and ideal. This is an impossible task imposed on both "Walt Whitman, an American" and America itself, as well as a burden for world that has inherited both Whitman and an America that insists on being both "exceptional" and a model to be emulated. The deep connection of Whitman's personal "specimen" with heterosexuality, eugenic health, and reproductive prowess repeatedly threatens to undercut the more radically democratic aspects of Whitman's ethos – not to mention betray Whitman's own lifelong struggles with disability and his complex sexuality.

Michael Cunningham argues in the preface to his selection of Whitman's poetry and prose, titled *Laws for Creations* (2006), that Whitman himself was a creation as one of "the first Americans to invent a self and then spend the remainder of his life becoming that person" (xxii). Whitman aimed to merge primarily with the persona he created and become, in Cunningham's words, "the man who would write [*Leaves of Grass*]." This persona and the cultural memory the readers share regarding Walt Whitman's life and times are re-written in Cunningham's *Specimen Days,* just as much as Whitman's poetry is: "Our inheritance," argues Cunningham, "is not only the *Leaves of Grass* but Whitman." (*Laws* xxii). It is important to define the persona Whitman worked to create, to become, and to sustain as his public image.

The "Walt Whitman, an American" of Whitman's works is partially modeled on the national poet Emerson called for in "Nature and the Powers of the Poet," later published as "The Poet," which Whitman had heard in 1842 (Loving). Emerson's formulation of the ideal American poet depicts a man who is both "representative" and "ideal", who "stands among partial men for the complete man" as a multivalent symbol of humanity. This call is answered in the 1855 edition of "The Song of Myself," in which Whitman's *persona* boasts of being "a kosmos" (39). The Poet, according to Emerson, is also special and singular, because he is not burdened with the kind of dullness and inertia that can be found in the average bookish person. He is able to connect to nature intensely and physically like "hunters, farmers, grooms, and butchers." Whitman's *persona* in "Song of Myself" similarly declares himself "enamored of growing outdoors" and of men whose occupations allow them to be in full contact with nature (30).

According to Emerson, the ideal American poet differed from other Anglo-Saxon American men in his intense awareness of the multiple aspects of the physical world, including topics that might be considered too "coarse" for literary contemplation. For Whitman, this implies a greater focus than ever in the history of Anglophone poetry on the body and sexuality, especially on the body and virility of the persona, described not only as a "kosmos," *pace* Emerson, but also as "one of the roughs," "disorderly fleshy and sensual […] eating drinking and breeding" (498). However, this intense emphasis on the physical body caused the famous scholar to withdraw his support from Whitman, especially after the poet publicized a letter from Emerson without the older author's permission (Loving).

Whitman's emphasis on sexuality and the flesh, in fact, stems from an alternate source; the "Walt Whitman" persona of Whitman's work might have been created in the image of the ideal Emersonian Poet, but he has been "fleshed" out by Whitman's own interest in physiognomy and what he called "my theory of physiological development underlying everything else" (qtd. in Aspiz 16). Walter Whitman himself, Aspiz tells us in *Walt Whitman and The Body Beautiful,* was physically, perhaps even congenitally, imperfect but managed to project an image of himself as a "physical culture hero" (3). Because Whitman's vision of the American poet was so closely tied to his vision of the robust, beautiful male body, and because he "contended that genuine prophecy and poetry can originate only in the man of perfect body," he cast the persona of "myself" and the subject of his verse autobiographies as both physically striking and strikingly physical.

Whitman's persona is a thoroughly idealized, vibrant male specimen, depicted eloquently in the poet's 1860 "Song at Sunset," in which he admires his own "rose -color'd flesh" and becomes "conscious of [his] body, so satisfied, so large!" In "Song of Myself," the persona praises the "spread of [his] body" (40). A later addition to the poem reminds the reader of the persona's eugenic physicality ("I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health") as well as his Emersonian role as a representative of all humankind: "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less" (36). Whitman, who calls himself "the teacher of athletes," also praises America's "athletic democracy" in his "To Foreign Lands." The persona connects with the United States through Emersonian representativeness, as well as through his robust, natural body. The barley-corn metaphor is not the only nature metaphor Whitman uses in creating his persona; from the leaves imprinted on the cover of the 1855 edition of the book to the lines in which he identifies with a "spotted hawk," *Leaves of Grass* creates and reifies a link between America's nature and the masculine persona, naturalizing him and imprinting him upon the pages as a formidable physical force (1321).

Whitman reiterated these links throughout his career. In an anonymous self-authored review of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, for example, he projected a physical image of the persona and expressed hope for a democratic voice and an "athletic literature":

> An American bard at last! One of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking, and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded, his posture strong and erect, his voice bringing hope and prophecy to the generous races of young and old. ("Walt Whitman and His Poems," 205)

In "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman further integrated his physical identity with the virile, "bearded, sun-burnt, grey-necked, forbidding" persona through genetic history: "Starting from fish-shape Paumanok, where I was born, well-begotten and rais'd by a perfect mother." Whitman's naturalization of "the American bard" as an "organic self" mimics the common post-bellum rhetorical move of naturalizing the Union through the metaphors of the body (Erkkila 93). While the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass* established the persona as a physical presence, the publication day, July 4, constructed him as essentially American, someone who "incarnates [America's] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes." The persona's body helps merge Americanness and democracy into a real-life utopia.

Interestingly, the twentieth century witnessed a reconstruction of Whitman's image from a fit persona into a complexly troubled poet – the type of man who somehow did not "breed," even as he compulsively described himself as a sire. Cunningham writes in the preface to *Laws of Creations* that our cultural memory of the poet paints him as anything but rough, masculine and representative: "There seems to be a widespread image of Whitman as some sort of avuncular uncle […] a doddering old creature offering affection all around in hope of having his affectations returned" (xviii). This process of transformation is well illustrated by comparing two pieces – one written by Ezra Pound, the other by Allen Ginsberg. The comparison helps us locate the shift in Whitman's image to the post-war period, when eugenics became widely discredited and America's robustness and innocence both came under question (Clarke 174; Degler).

In his 1909 essay "What I Feel about Walt Whitman," Pound opined that Whitman bore "the exceeding great stench" of the unrefined country (qtd. in Erkkila 8). In his 1913 poem "A Pact," Pound elaborates on this construction: Whitman is described as a crude "pig-headed father":

It was you that broke the new wood,

Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root –

Let there be commerce between us.

Like Whitman, Pound uses a metaphor from working class culture, depicting the poet as a robust lumberjack. His vision depends on nature and the concept of reproduction; this Whitman is a procreative male who has emerged easily and organically out of American soil. There is no break between the poet and the persona or between the bard and his nation. Pound further masculinizes and Americanizes Whitman when he suggests they engage in the manly, mercantile activity of "commerce." Pound's Whitman, however unappealing to the modernist, is entirely at home in America and is accepted as an unpolished revolutionary.

In "A Supermarket in California" (1955), Ginsberg imagines an entirely different, ineffectual Whitman -- a half-crazed, shuffling prophet who asks desperate questions of grocery boys. Rather than engaging in commerce, he seems lost in consumer culture, and, even more interestingly, lost in America:

> In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images,
>
> I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!
>
> […]
>
> I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.
>
> I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel? (29-30)

While Ginsberg is more sympathetic to Whitman than Pound (he calls him "dear father" and "courage-teacher"), Ginsberg portrays the poet as a senile and perverted dreamer in an America alienated from nature; the fruits are "neon" and the pork chops seems to have materialized inside the

refrigerator without having ever existed as the flesh of living, breathing animals. There is no revolutionary "unscrewing" of "doors from their jambs," and Ginsberg makes it clear that the system is omnipotent and mechanical: "The doors close in an hour." While it is understandable that Ginsberg would depict the nineteenth-century poet as out of place in postmodernity, he also chooses to dissociate Whitman from any connection to nature and eugenic activity; the poet is non-reproductive ("childless") and isolated ("lonely"). Unlike Pound's (re)productive Whitman who was the first to "break" the essential American artistic wood and unlike the persona who has merged with the American continent, Ginsberg's Whitman is utterly out of place in the postwar United States. Ginsberg imagines himself and Whitman strolling in the suburbs together, "dreaming of the lost America of love" two ineffectual misfits. Whitman's beard, which had functioned for the poet/persona as a sign of masculinity and implied that he was "No dainty dolce affettuoso" in "Starting from Paumanok," now casts him as an unproductive proto-beatnik (30). Ginsberg affectionately nicknames him "Graybeard" and whimsically asks, "Which way does your beard point tonight?"

Despite the imposing frontispiece on his perfect "physiognomy," and the centrality of the robust, idealized body of the American male to Whitman's poetics and politics, virility and health are not the first associations to come to mind when Americans think of Whitman in the twenty-first century. Whitman the poet is the quintessential outsider to the postmodern mind. Yet, as Robert Martin's *Continuing Presence of Whitman* (1992) reveals, Whitman, "protean, elusive, slippery," is still an imposing, if contradictory, icon of democracy (xvii). His ecstatic, all-embracing lines, however punctuated by pronatalist, proto-eugenicist, and jingoistic statements, continue to hold unmatched political potential, drawing in dreamers within and without the United States. It is this multivalent Whitman – gendered, politicized, fictional, biographical, and always already re-written – that Cunningham rewrites in *Specimen Days.*

Whitman and Twenty-First Century Specimens

Cunningham makes it clear in the first page of *Laws for Creations* that he is acutely aware of Whitman's emphasis on physicality. He describes having felt a visceral connection to Whitman while reading the lines from

"So Long," that imagine Whitman embracing a future American poet: "It is I you hold and who holds you, I spring from the page into your arms." "Never before," confesses Cunningham, "had a writer leaped off the page and touched me like that: directly, personally, erotically" (*Laws* ix). Cunningham is aware that both Whitman's persona and historical reality constitute "our inheritance" as much as his works, if not more (xxii).

Cunningham reports that in his early readings of the novel *Specimen Days* he was constantly asked why he felt the need to incorporate Whitman in a novel that includes a malformed child, a black female forensic psychologist, a lovelorn cyborg and "lizard women from other planets" (xiii). This list of alternative bodies marks the author's attempt to reinstate the "imperfect" body into socio-political life. They range from shockingly deformed to strikingly beautiful, from alien and animalistic to cybernetic, in a postmodern freak show that nevertheless carries the seed of a truly democratic utopia. Whitman's multiple poetic bodies (whether ideal, invisible or infirm) play an important role in this revision, as the poet emerges out of the pages of the novel in many physical and psychological variations. Like Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California," Cunningham asks not only "what Whitmans do we have?" but also "what America do we have?" To its credit, the novel refuses to construct a "lost America of love," and lovingly undoes the links between nature, the male body, and democracy Whitman established through his eugenic persona.

Specimen Days is made up of three connected long stories, set in different historical periods and populated by characters whose names and identities cross plotlines. The three main characters Lucas/Luke, Catherine/Cat/Catareen, and Simon move through a "dark and difficult America" beginning with the slums of post-civil war New York City, reappearing in post-9/11 United States and ending up in a contaminated, depopulated science-fiction America that has barely survived a nuclear blast (xxiii). Although the focus of the stories shifts from character to character, certain motifs and themes echo throughout the text. What we find in this triptych novel is a weaving and an unweaving of Whitman's selves – particularly a rejection of exceptional, representative, male "wholeness" as the necessity for progressive politics. Rather the cyborg becomes the perfect lens to rupture the excesses of Whitman's natural specimens; to quote Haraway, this "creature in a post-gender world […] does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden" (150-1).

Lucas, a first generation Irish-American child laborer burdened with physical deformities, is the central character of the first story, "In the Machine." After his brother Simon's death in an industrial accident, Lucas begins to work at the stamping machine that has devoured Simon's young body and slowly comes to the delirious conclusion that his brother's ghost still inhabits his machine and travels through familiar machines in order to tempt loved ones into death. In the belief that all machines "love" their people to death, Lucas becomes obsessed with saving the life of beautiful Catherine, Simon's fiancée, who is a garment-worker and, as Cunningham slowly reveals, a prostitute. Catherine, re-named Cat and reincarnated as a black forensic psychologist, is the focus of the second story, "The Children's Crusade," a post-9/11 thriller in which a deformed boy with a distinct resemblance to Lucas turns out to be a suicide-bomber. This nameless, dysgenic boy was raised by an old woman in a house wallpapered with the pages of *Leaves of Grass* among other abandoned children, who serve an anti-modern, environmentalist terrorist cult called "the Family." In this story, Simon is reincarnated as a fit and successful stockbroker and Cat's younger, mildly supportive boyfriend.

Simon, in his turn, becomes the focal character of the final story, "Like Beauty," a science fiction tale about a cyborg called Simon in love with an alien "immigrant" called Catareen. Catareen, still melancholic, is now a four-and-a-half-foot tall lizard originally from the planet Nadia, the first extraterrestrial colonial conquest of human civilization. In this tale, Lucas is reincarnated as "Luke," a neo-Christian who has become disfigured because his impoverished mother knowingly swallowed drugs that harm fetuses due to her misguided belief that the drug company has some kind of monetary "reparation" program (257). Cunningham's *Specimen Days* ends with an odd group of non-specimens, including Luke, and Nadians leaving for a new planet about which they know little in a rewriting of the final essay from Whitman's *Specimen Days*, "Nature and Democracy—Morality."

In each of these stories, at least one character is enthralled by Walt Whitman's poetry in ways they cannot fully control. In "In the Machine," Lucas quotes from *Leaves of Grass* whenever he is agitated, even if he doesn't want to "speak as the book" (4). Whitman's poetry functions as a symptom of mental disease (a literary Tourette's Syndrome, perhaps?) or as prophecy, depending on one's interpretation. In "The Children's Crusade," there is no question that Whitman's poetry is used for more sinister

purposes: the child terrorists leave cryptic messages with phrases from the poet to Cat, whose obsessive-compulsive note-taking resembles the poet's sprawling, associative lyrics, as well as Ginsberg's surreal, questioning Whitman: "What lives in empty rooms? How far does the light reach? Are there teeth in the wood?" (116). One of the leaders of the Luddite cult is an old, half-insane woman who calls herself Walt Whitman and has covered the house in which she raises abandoned children as terrorists with the pages of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's ecstatic lines such as "to die is different from what everyone supposes and luckier" become death threats or suicide bombers' mottos. Whitman's vision of a natural American utopia has been reduced to a futile dream of a murderous sect. In "Like Beauty," Walt Whitman's poetry reaches us through Simon, a cyborg whose implanted Whitman "poetry chip" fires uncontrollably and apparently at random, putting his life in danger. His designer Emory Lowell, however, argues that the chip offers a kind of "moral sense" (281), as well as giving Simon something resembling a soul sparked with passion.

All three characters are further united through their status as outsiders who are unable to connect to the social environment; they suffer from deformities ranging from the physical to the spiritual. The Lucas-figure is not only disfigured but also has a congenital heart defect; identifying a gap between his image and his true identity, he resents being "continually mistaken for a misshapen boy with a walleye and a pumpkin head and a habit of speaking in fits" (4). Catherine seems world-weary and disenchanted in all of the stories; her whole life is defined by the act of projecting personae in order to cover emotional weak spots. In the first story, she is secretly a pregnant prostitute; in "The Children's Crusade," Cat is divorced and has lost a child, and feels the need to feign either propriety or toughness in order to function as a black woman in a racist and sexist society (156). In "Like Beauty," Catareen's calm taciturnity conceals her secret past as a rebel whose actions led to the execution of her whole family.

Simon, on the other hand, is almost entirely defined by lack, despite appearing to be cool, complete, and competent. He is the closest thing the book has to the persona of the frontispiece at best a ghost in the first story. In the second story, he is described as an artificial beauty, a shell, or a life-sized doll (134). In the final tale, Simon re-appears as a cyborg who feels that he lacks something very important, a kind of life-force Catareen refers

to as "stroth" in her native tongue – a term the reader is encouraged to read as a combination of "soul" and "strength."

While all three figures channel the Whitman persona in some way, in "In the Machine," the historical Walt Whitman actually makes an appearance, as Lucas runs into him in the street, wearing "workingman's boots" and a broad-brimmed hat. This Whitman does not differ at all from the Walt Whitman on paper; not only is he "utterly like his likeness," he even has a face "like brown paper" (66). Cunningham refuses to apotheosize his Whitman, who entirely misunderstands Lucas and replies to the boy's realistic pleas and questions with transcendental romanticism. When Lucas, looking for money, asks him where he should go, Whitman advises him to follow his heart. This advice prompts the boy to inform the poet that his heart is defective. Whitman reads Lucas' words symbolically and declares: "It's not in the least defective. You can believe me on that account" bringing the boy to the verge of tears (69). The poet then directs Lucas to go to Central Park, to the grass and to nature, in a move that establishes his sentimental belief in nature as a panacea. Seeing the grass, however, only triggers a death-wish in Simon, who decides that when he dies he will "leave his defective body and turn into grass" and concludes he had been "yearning for" precisely that (73). Unlike Whitman's persona, who remains intact like a puzzle piece even as he merges with nature in many combinations, Lucas's encounter with nature becomes one of absolute dissolution.

In "The Children's Crusade," Whitman's likeness appears once more in a poster that contrasts greatly with the physically-striking persona, possessing a "great lightbulb of old-man nose [and] small dark eyes looking out from the cottony crackle of beard and hair (144). Like the brown paper of the first description, the imagery of cotton links Whitman to the world of objects that start out as a part of nature but are manufactured to the point of becoming unrecognizable in their final, utilitarian form. Whitman's romantic organicism has now become deadly as *Leaves of Grass* is transformed into the manifesto of a technophobic cult that is bent on destroying the poet's beloved United States. When Cat tries to conjure up an image of the poet she can only come up with what seems to be a comic distillation of the poet's daguerreotypes with a "Big, white, Santa Claus beard, [and] floppy hat." (128). This equation of Walt Whitman with two-

dimensional images is jarring, given Cunningham's awareness of the poet's insistence on physicality.

The elderly writer peeking out of the paper, however, is not the only Whitman in *Specimen Days*, nor is he the most central one. Cunningham allows a sexually magnetic, athletic persona to slowly emerge to the physical epicenter of the novel as Simon progressively "materializes" much like the engraving at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass,* starting as a ghost in the first story, becoming a fit young man with a hard, muscular body in the second and turning into nearly pure physicality as a cyborg for the final tale. Simon is, of course, not an actual physical presence in "In the Machine"; he remains a ghost, haunting the text even if the reader chooses not to believe Lucas's theories about hungry ghosts, beckoning the living from machines. However, we know that this nineteenth-century Simon was a virile, procreative young man; he has managed to impregnate Catherine and have sex with another promiscuous neighborhood girl before dying. We do not know if he has any more progeny, but he is by far the most eugenically successful character in the story. In contrast to the painfully misshapen Lucas and the unimposing, two-dimensional Whitman, Simon is depicted as a strong, manly and beautiful youth, "serene in his heedless milk-white beauty" with "his eyes narrow, his jaw set" (3, 27). Even when the factory stamper crushes his body and makes him unrecognizable, Simon becomes not hideous but "extraordinary" (28). These idealized descriptions prepare us for the full physical impact Simon makes as an extraordinarily fit Midwesterner in "The Children's Crusade":

> He was so unassailably young and fit. He was a Jaguar, he was a goddamned parade float rolling along, demonstrating to ordinary citizens that a gaudier, grander world – a world of potently serene, self-contained beauty – appeared occasionally amid the squalor of ongoing business. (109)

Simon's magnetic beauty echoes Whitman's idealized persona. The description also rehearses Whitman's depictions of exemplary young American men, who came to embody the eugenic potential of the body after a stroke left the poet half-paralyzed, forcibly breaking links between Whitman the poet and the persona. In *Specimen Days*, for example, the

poet describes a youth as "not an inappropriate specimen in character and elements of that bulk of the average good American race" (82). Simon of "The Children's Crusade," like such Whitmanesque young men, is both idealized and generalized; he is a "specimen" in all senses of the term. Cat calls him "a classic," a perfectly polished manifestation of a racial type, fresh "off the assembly line of whatever corporation produced the Great American Beauties" (111). This Simon also has a lot of procreative promise; Cat imagines how beautiful their children would have been and imagines a future in which Simon would marry "a pretty white woman his own age or a few years younger" and end up "raising children" (165). In the third story, "Like Beauty," Simon has no actual procreative potential, but, as a cyborg, he appears beautiful and immortal. Equally "unassailably young and fit," in this story, he has been created out of mechanical and biological parts by a corporation only five years ago, and hence literally fresh "off the assembly line." Like the earlier Simons, the cyborg Simon is perfectly formed and appears pleasingly "big, bright and loud" to Catareen (288). Coming back as a ghost, thriving as a fit young man or escaping destruction as a cyborg implanted with a potent survival chip, Simon epitomizes the persona as well as what Whitman called his "instinct of self-preservation" – a defiant drive to remain a physical agent in the material world (qtd. in Aspiz 17).

Simon, however, is neither Walter Whitman the poet nor a copy of Walt Whitman the persona; in "The Children's Crusade," he admits to never having read a single line of the poet (133). Moreover, Cat describes him as a somewhat mechanical lover, "more focused than passionate," unlike the intensely passionate persona of "Song of Myself" whose greatest wish seems to be to "merge" with all human bodies (26). Instead, Cunningham projects the multiple, contradictory Whitmans onto the multiple characters of *Specimen Days*, allowing each to become alternate specimens at given moments. With his disfigured body and "heightened perception," Lucas evokes the elderly Whitman, who claimed to harbor a vigorous spirit that clashed with his outward appearance (Cunningham 256; Aspiz 14). Like the invisible, observing Walter Whitman, Lucas walks the streets of Broadway, "hoping to be invisible to others as they were visible to him" (7).

The persona's amorphous sexuality, on the other hand, finds its manifestation in Catherine, who becomes pregnant with Simon's baby in the first story, adopts Lucas in the second one, and turns into a large alien reptile with mammary glands in the final tale. Like the persona,

who identifies with birds of prey, Catareen is utterly like "an animal, seizing prey" (239). In her visual lust for Simon, Cat also channels the Whitmanesque "gaze of sensual desire"; when she spies on Simon in the shower, she functions as a re-writing of the figure of the twenty-ninth bather in "Song of Myself" (Gutman; Cunningham 128). In this vignette, a young woman watches 28 young men bathe in a river, touching them with her unseen gaze, and wishing to join their number ("Song of Myself" 29). She also comes closest to the historical Walter Whitman in her ability to project different personas. In the first story, Catherine acts like a chaste fiancée despite working as a prostitute; in the second story, we see her adapt a pose ("queenly bearing") and tone ('schoolmarm diction") meant to shield her from racism and sexism (141). She also pretends to be tough and "wised-up" in order to seduce her younger, white boyfriend (166). As Catareen, this character speaks very little and it takes Simon a very long time to learn that she was an exiled rebel with a painful past. She confesses to Simon that even back on Planet Nadia she "felt this divide between who [she] appeared to be and who [she] knew herself to be" (266).

Cunningham's emphasis on the characters' "secret sel[ves]" that do not correlate to their physiologies, is one of the author's most significant revisions of Whitman's emphasis on the importance of physiology and his wish to unite the robust persona and his multifarious "self" (134). In this, *Specimen Days* defies the concept of representative specimens and perfect types as well as Whitman's "theory of physiological development underlying everything." Instead, Cunningham emphasizes the Whitman who could see and relate the promise of democracy in two parallel lines of "The Song of Myself": "The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck" and "The President holding a cabinet council [and] is surrounded by the great Secretaries" (32). Thus the novel underlines a spirit of moral engagement that does not ignore the physical but still exceeds it.

Specimen Days does not simply "make a pact" with Walt Whitman à la Pound; it is closer to the dreamy stroll with Whitman of Allen Ginsberg, with a touch of cyborg feminism. The chronology of the novel reveals a socio-political lack of ethics that has allowed America to dangerously industrialize, attack foreign countries on questionable grounds and, in "Like Beauty," suffer an atomic meltdown (xx). Cunningham's remedy, however, is neither natural rejuvenation nor eugenic procreation; instead,

he updates the concept of the soul, re-written as "stroth" for the cybernetic century. Through "stroth" and the figure of the cyborg, Cunningham divorces the idea of democracy from the reproductive body and the United States, and reconfigures it as an abstraction that nevertheless leaks into the physical.

From Eugenic Specimen to Cyborg/Alien/Human Stroth

In *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman constructs visions of a split between the body and the soul in order to argue for an eventual merging, and hence uncouples the Platonic and Cartesian binary that has rhetorically privileged the soul over the body. "Song of Myself" continually places the primary agency on the body, beginning with the early declaration: "I loafe and invite my soul" (22). Whitman makes clear that a major part of his poetic project is to equalize the two parts of the human being by calling himself both the "poet of the body" and the "poet of the soul" (36) and declaring "I have said that the soul is not more than the body, / And I have said that the body is not more than the soul" (64). However this syntactic equality fails to establish semantic equality: Killingsworth notes that Whitman's early poetry tends to overemphasize the physical, despite the use of the anti-binary poetic tool ("Human Body"). The privileging of material body is further apparent in lines that depict the poet's soul as a parallel body and lover who, for example, in a June morning "parted the shirt from [his] bosom-bone, and plunged [its] tongue to [his] barestript heart" (24). This emphasis on the physical is connected to the poet's faith in the connection between a fit "physiognomy," the continent's natural geography, and the country's future as a real-life utopia for "the race of all races," that is Americans ("Preface" 6). The most well-known political image of "Song of Myself," is after all, "grass" – growing all over America, among diverse social strata and throughout eternity as a "hieroglyphic of democracy" (Erkkila 99). "Nature remains," Whitman wrote in 1876, and praised the organic world as "the only permanent reliance of the book or human life" and as the backbone of American democracy (*Specimen Days* 82).

Cunningham's *Specimen Days* begins less optimistically about this threefold connection, since the story starts with nature dying and ends in a post-meltdown America where nothing is "as pure as it looks" (268). Readers are introduced to an utterly different America as Lucas opens

the novel by saying: "Walt said that the dead turned to grass, but there was no grass where they buried Simon" (4). Cunningham continues to challenge Whitman's idyllic construction of nature and the robust human body when he incorporates the lines and images of "Song of Myself" into a representation of the industrial slums of nineteenth century New York. Whitman's line "the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery" becomes a tragic joke when Lucas's hand is crushed by the stamper and needs to be amputated (44). Whitman's organicism has been appropriated by a terrorist organization when the old female terrorist who calls herself "Walt Whitman" insists it is time to go back to nature and to "move back to the country" and declares it is "time to live on the land again. It's time to stop polluting the rivers and cutting down the forests" (169, 171). This terrorist argues that Whitman was the last great man who truly loved nature and that "machinery was just starting up when he lived." She is hoping for a "return to a time like Whitman's" when technology was still an emergent phenomenon as opposed to a hegemonic one (188). *Specimen Days* rejects such fascist utopianism, even as it painfully exposes readers to disaster after disaster caused by machinery and greed. The novel recognizes the proto-cyborg impulses in Whitman's poetry, which, after all, focused not just on "signing one's self" but also on signing "the body electric."

Cunningham further complicates two of Whitman's most cherished signifiers by further infusing them with cyborg politics: grass and water. Grass is central to the poetic and political vision of *Leaves of Grass*, as it enables Whitman to essentialize and thus reify the American Union. Water implies a direct, sensual connection to nature in Whitman's early poetry, as the persona declares he "will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked" and that he wishes to be in contact with the river (11). *Specimen Days* de-naturalizes both of these motifs. The grass that does not exist outside of Central Park – itself a modern marvel of urban planning designed to look like the wilderness – in the first section reappears in the third story as an artificial object, maintained with regular doses of "chlorophyll spray" in order to recreate the old Central Park for rich foreign tourists in "Like Beauty" (234). Whitman's wish to be in full contact with nature by swimming is converted into a nightmare when the beautiful pond the characters swim in turns out to be toxic and makes Luke violently ill (260). As nature, physiognomy, and American

exceptionalism fail as guarantors of democracy, Cunningham offers "stroth" as a potential resource for a progressive, post-American society – a phenomenon described as a sense of "engagement and aliveness" possessed by humans *and* Nadians (281). Stroth is entirely divorced from materialism and rationalism; it is a sense of connection, and a non-utilitarian, non-productive type of morality. Yet it is not an inborn (or genetic) quality: Simon the cyborg slowly develops stroth throughout the final story and Cunningham signifies this development through his increasing appreciation of abstract "beauty" and his increasingly non-evolutionary, irrational behavior. Simon becomes fully actualized when he decides to stay with the dying Catareen instead of taking off for another planet with other alienated citizens of the world despite the fact this action aids neither Catareen nor Simon. Once Catareen passes away, Simon continues to act in a non-productive manner. He runs towards the space shuttle and calls after the group that has just left the earth to found a new extraterrestrial nation, although he knows they cannot see or hear him:

> He knew it was too late. Even if they could see him (they could not see him), there was no way to bring the ship down again, no rope or ladder to unfurl.
>
> "No," he shouted. "Please, oh, please wait for me."
>
> [….]
>
> Simon remained under the stars and the points of moving light shouting, "Wait, wait, wait, oh, please wait for me." (303)

What Simon does in this passage constitutes, from a materialist point of view, a waste of precious calories. The repetition of the signs "wait" and "please" construct what he does as a musical lament; a work of art designed to be expressive rather than pragmatic and utilitarian. Cunningham emphasizes this type of non-productive action as both poignant and important as Simon holds Catareen's corpse gently, "though of course it made no difference," and drapes his shirt over the body before burying her, "though of course it made no difference" (304). Soon afterwards he feels something entirely nameless and intangible lurking within him: "A pure change had happened. He felt it buzzing through his circuits. He had no

name for it" (305). Catareen, of course, has a name for exactly that kind of immaterial life force that propels beings to do things against the odds, against rationality, against "nature" -- stroth.

Through immaterial and irrational stroth, Cunningham divorces the idea of democracy from the eugenic body, reproduction, and nature, and reconnects it to the *process* of visionary change. As Simon looks at the odd collection of humans and Nadians leaving for a new planet, he realizes that democracy demands broken revolutionaries. In the words of Haraway, the cyborg is "wary of holism, but needy for connection" (151):

> Crazy, Simon thought. They're all crazy. Though of course the passengers on the Mayflower had probably been like this, too: zealots and oddballs and ne'er-do-wells, setting out to colonize a new world because the old world wasn't much interested in their furtive and quirky passions [….] It was nut jobs. It was hysterics and visionaries and petty criminals. (293)

This is not how Walt Whitman would have characterized the United States or its utopian future at the turn of the nineteenth century. The poet had ended his *Democratic Vistas* by asserting the importance of "physiognomy," despite bemoaning the physical decline of American bodies earlier in the text, arguing that "the average, the bodily, the concrete" form "the main thing […] on which all structures of the future are to permanently rest" (258). That physical, eugenic ideal has not entirely disappeared from Cunningham's *Specimen Days*; it survives in an extremely distorted form in the visions of Emory Lowell, Simon's designer, who hopes to ensure genetic diversity on the new planet by combining the genomes of "oddballs" such as Luke and half-breed Nadians (268). However, it is the more radically democratic Whitman that wins out in the end. We have reason to hope that, unlike the colonizers of the Americas and the conquistadors of Nadia, these misfits will neither destroy nature nor annihilate native inhabitants in order to become "democratic" Americans.

For most of his career, Whitman put "the body [at the] the heart of democratic politics" (Killingsworth, "Human Body"). Cunningham, on the other hand, constructs democracy as a lunatic's utopia and as an

imperfect process built upon intangible stroth. Writing after two World Wars, after Vietnam and Chernobyl, and under the specter of transnational and state-sponsored terrorism, Cunningham apparently cannot produce a young, athletic, and smoothly democratic America upheld by robust, eugenic, reproductive bodies. His *Specimen Days* de-materializes America as an idea, and a "dream" (*Laws* xxv). In divorcing the "natural" geography of the United States from human revolutionary impulse, Cunningham isolates the primary, essential element for progressive change in a life-force that simultaneously resides in our interconnected, bio-mechanical selves and "leaps off the pages" of works like Whitman's. Thus when Simon the cyborg's poetry chip successfully invites his soul, it is despite as well as through Walt Whitman, the poet and persona.

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