This volume provides students of American literature with models and methods for approaching the question of embodiment. It underscores the body as at once dynamic – shaping our experience of the world through complex interplay between social and biological influences – and intersectional – resisting attempts for discrete analysis at every turn. By highlighting these two qualities, *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body* foregrounds the body’s enmeshed interspersal throughout core concerns of American literary studies, including those focused on race, gender, sexuality, history, and ecology.

Despite this range, insights from one particular field – disability studies – comprise the volume’s most prominent conceptual resource, providing a thread linking essays on topics as seemingly varied as sentimental fiction, slave narratives, the history of reading, and ecocriticism. The significance of disability studies to discussions of embodiment in American literature shouldn’t be surprising. Disability, illness, and chronic pain were among the first topics within Americanist criticism to veer away from a Cartesian mind/body split that otherwise frequently manifested in starker and more binary terms than even Descartes envisioned. To take just one example, William Joseph Long’s *1913 American Literature: A Study of the Men and the Books that in the Earlier and Later Times Reflect the American Spirit* almost exclusively speaks of authors as disembodied creators. The notable exception occurs when Long turns to those writers experiencing sickness and chronic pain, such as Puritan Michael Wigglesworth, whose experience as a “lifelong sufferer from disease” finds itself reflected in the “powerful but morbid imagination” of his poetry. Despite the limitations of his ableist worldview, the disabled bodies of his subjects force Long into a nascent understanding of how bodies and creative imaginations collaborate to produce visions of the world that influence readers’ perceptions and understandings. More recently, feminist literary critic Christina Crosby’s memoir *A Body, Undone: Living on After Great Pain* (2016) addresses how bodily...
suffering forced her to reckon with the many different links rendering mind and body different yet inseparable. “There are,” she notes, “108 single-word prepositions in the English language, and none is adequate to representing the relation of mind to body. Body and mind are simultaneously one and the same and clearly distinct. Thinking my body, I am thinking in my body, as my body, through my body, of my body, about my body, and I’m oriented around my body. I’m beside myself.” 2 As the chapters in this volume attest, American literature has long borne witness to what we might call the all-at-onceness of this incredible multiplicity, seeking to fill in the details of these prepositional relationships binding and separating our minds and our bodies, filling out representations of the self that cannot neatly divide into material and immaterial components. Simultaneously, American literature and Americanist criticism have provided accounts for how unequal distributions of access and power shape even this most intimate of relationships between being and embodying.

No critical work has been more influential for thinking about these hierarchies than cultural theorist Hortense J. Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), an essay that comes up repeatedly in the contributions to this volume. In a tour de force of conceptual analysis, Spillers tracks how racial, economic, and gendered configurations animate our bodies, tactically rooting theory within the lived realities of Black women’s captive bodies under plantation economies and Atlantic world slavery. Distinguishing between the body and the flesh, Spillers describes a system of “total objectification” that “spear[s]” Black flesh from Black bodies. 3 If the body is discrete – affording relations between a distinct “human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another” – the flesh, Spillers suggests, names an undifferentiated “captive community.” 4 By rendering Black beings as flesh, depriving captives of differentiation and placing them outside the symbolic grammar of the family, the Atlantic slave trade and its legacies in “a post-emancipation neo-enslavement” leave Black people “ungendered.” 5 For whites, on the other hand, Spillers’s theorization tracks how embodiment proffers access to the validated, recognized, and proper subject positions of family life, as well as the economic organizations designed to benefit these gendered subjects: “the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of ‘cold cash,’” which, together, become “the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.” 6 Yet for Spillers, the denial of access to these positions might itself offer promising and even queer potential for an “altered reading of gender” and the opportunity to embody, through the “problematizing of gender,” a “different social subject.” 7 The lesson here is thus not to
understand Black women’s bodies solely through the lens of marginalization and subjection, which, as Jennifer Nash argues, would “ultimately romanticize and idealize positions of social subordination and reinstall conceptions that black women’s bodies are sites of ‘strength’ and ‘transcendence’ rather than complex spaces of multiple meanings.” The point, especially for a volume like this, is instead that the teaching, theorizing, and thinking that come out of Black Study, as Spillers notes in a 2006 interview revisiting the essay, occupy a central position for the study of American literature and the body more broadly. The conceptual resources of Black Study and Black feminisms provide “a discourse, or a vocabulary” for Americanist work, one that makes it necessary “that black women be in the conversation.”

Spillers’s subtitle, “An American Grammar Book,” indicates an argument that parallels her distinction between the body and the flesh: namely, that the process of embodiment occurs within systems of language and meaning, and that bodies and their gestures enter as signifiers back into those same systems. Hence, in Spillers’s critical vocabulary, structures shaping the childhoods of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm El Shabazz comprise an “amazing thematic synonymity”; the intergenerational inheritance of trauma and displacement occurs through “symbolic substitutions”; “the body” serves as “a resource for metaphor”; and so on. Using the vocabulary of literary criticism to describe systems of embodiment and disembodiment (or enfleshment), Spillers shows how the key terms of this volume – “American literature” and “the body” – denote an interdependency.

Queer theorists have similarly charted this relationship, exploring the distinctly literary factors that produce bodies, embodiments, and bodily acts as intelligible and knowable. When Christopher Looby describes sexuality as “essentially a literary phenomenon,” for example, he indicates how literature brings into existence the very terms and categories through which we understand bodies and their desires, those of others as well as our own: “Sexual identities (or labels or categories or scripts) need to be articulated, promulgated, circulated, and encountered in order to be received and adopted and performed, and this requires a literary public sphere.” The chapters in this volume provide careful, patient accounts of precisely these relationships. Yet they take an additional step as well, finding in literary representation a resource that helps us follow theorist E. Patrick Johnson’s insistence that we identify concepts for describing not only how the body “is brought into being, but what it does once it is constituted and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it.” In so doing, these chapters heed literature’s interest in embodiment as a source for considering bodies in relation to one another. Simultaneously, they track American literature’s interest in alternative modes of knowledge creation and how such incipient
knowledge often emerges through the proximity between bodies and the concrete embeddedness of bodies in their social settings.

Resisting the tendency diagnosed by Michel Foucault, among many others, to place non-normative subjects and bodies under analysis while neglecting study of normative subjects and bodies, this book’s chapters highlight white bodies as well as those racialized nonwhite, nondisabled bodies as well as disabled, cisgender embodiment as well as transgender, bodies going about their everyday activities as well as bodies in states of exception. Moreover, the book resists any tendency to treat race and gender as discrete categories. Instead, as the summaries below detail, the contributors to this volume provide us with multiple different models, concepts, and analytical frameworks for viewing the bodies we encounter in literature precisely through their intersectional relationship with multiple different aspects of embodied experience ranging from war trauma to reading to illness.\(^\text{13}\)

The volume groups its chapters into two sections, which lay out formal and methodological parameters for analyzing bodies in American literature. Part I, “Genres,” explores how eight key American literary genres – early Atlantic world theater, the sentimental novel, slave narratives, the Gothic, multiethnic fiction, science fiction, and the contemporary transgender novel – record particular relationships between history and corporeal existence. A chapter on slave narratives, for instance, traces how that genre meticulously itemizes, first, slavery’s impact on all aspects of enslaved people’s somatic existence – from illness to sensory capacity – and, second, slavery’s impact on the corporeality of the women and men who did the enslaving. Or, to highlight a more recent example, a chapter on the contemporary transgender novel interrogates how the genre focuses on realignments of the nexus between subjectivity and bodily presentation even as it points to the limits of “wrong body” narratives for understanding transgender identity. As the breadth of these two examples shows, the representation of bodies in American literature is an inexhaustible topic. These critical readings of key American genres therefore won’t provide anything like a comprehensive treatment, but they will provide readers with a rigorous and accessible overview of archives and historical contexts for thinking carefully about bodies in literature.

Opening the volume with his chapter on the genre of early US-Atlantic theater (Chapter 1), Marvin McAllister explores how physical bodies of the early American stage enabled playwrights, actors, and theater goers to link their individual bodies with the social body and the body politic. Doing so permitted people to reimagine relationships between individual variation and larger gendered, racial, and imperial collectivities. Focusing on three types commonly found on the Atlantic world stage – the American girl, the...
Yankee, and the racialized stage Indian—McAllister shows myriad ways that Old World dramatic characters found themselves refashioned into “a New World repertoire.” In the process, he reveals the stage as a privileged literary-performative medium for presenting “the thinking subject as a corporeal or bodied being.”

Turning her attention to a longstanding emphasis on literature as an aesthetic mode that produces feeling, Claudia Stokes links the susceptibility of the reading body to corporeal vulnerability. In Chapter 2, which considers a range of works—from the correspondence of Nathaniel Hawthorne, to Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791), to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novels Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) and Dred (1856)—Stokes makes a powerful argument that sentimental fiction conceives of disability as a universal rather than an exceptional category. If sentimentalism began with narratives depicting the dangers of seduction to vulnerable young women, it simultaneously presented sympathy as a source of bodily danger. Hence in texts like Stowe’s Dred, characters’ sympathetic assistance to those in need frequently results in infection and even death. Yet such debility, Stokes finds, did not couple bodily impairment with depravity, as do so many American literary depictions of disabled characters. Rather, in texts such as Maria Susanna Cummins’s The Lamplighter (1854), sentimentalism often upholds the disabled, atypical body as the corporeal expression of Christian piety.

Continuing this focus on how nineteenth-century prose genres theorized disability, in Chapter 3 Maurice Wallace examines the slave narrative as a genre that reveals how slavery’s physical violence against Black captives acted to write white power onto Black bodies as an everyday display of white domination. Considering the banality of Black bodily injury and disability in Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Josiah Henson’s The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada as Narrated by Himself (1849), Wallace tracks both slavery’s production of Black disability and the historical panic over white bodily depletion. In so doing, the chapter conceptualizes what Wallace terms a Black body/white body complex, a parasitic struggle in which whites aimed to recover waning vigor by exerting brute power over the Black bodies they held captive.

Such a tension, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (Chapter 4) argues, frequently plays out against fault lines within and against the category of the human that are so frequently the topic of American gothic fiction across white and Black, undead and dead, male and female, normative and monstrous, sane and insane, straight and queer. The chapter first situates the origins of the American Gothic at the meeting ground between the British gothic novel in the late eighteenth century and three sociocultural forces within early
American history – settler colonialism, Puritan distrust of the body, and the Atlantic slave trade. The chapter then examines how, as the genre shifted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it began to reorient the axis between the normal and the monstrous toward divisions within ableness, health, race, gender, and sexuality.

In Chapter 5, Colleen Glenney Boggs covers tremendous historical ground to explain a key means by which American literature grapples with representations of the body at war. By shifting from the battlefield violence we might expect in such a chapter to white women’s bodily suffering as an affirmation of national innocence, Boggs argues that American war literature finds its greatest strength in the refusal of its topic, obscuring genocidal violence waged against Black Americans and Natives. With readings of texts by authors including Louisa May Alcott, William Apess, James Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane, Frederick Douglass, Frances E. W. Harper, Ernest Hemingway, Julia Ward Howe, Phil Klay, Herman Melville, Toni Morrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Boggs broadens our consideration of the impact war literature has on racializing bodies and on influencing which lives matter.

Similarly attentive to the legacies of settler colonialism and white supremacy, in Chapter 6 Sony Corañez Bolton highlights a set of novels written by Asian American and Latinx writers, revealing how multicultural fiction situates bodies within the historical legacies of hybridity and racial mixture. By analyzing historical flashpoints in the meanings of race – including the conquest, the transatlantic slave trade, transpacific imperialism, the civil rights movement, and contemporary debates on US American multiculturalism – Bolton identifies the seemingly incommensurate ways that multiethnic bodies have been shaped through representation. In the process, the chapter uses readings of texts such as Bryan Ascalon Roley’s American Son (2001), Jessica Hagedorn’s Dogeaters (1991), Junot Diaz’s The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Beyond Vietnam” (1967) to show how the racialization of bodies within the United States always occurs within a larger framework of the Americas and US imperialism.

In Chapter 7, Frances Tran examines the possibilities the genre of science fiction offers for exploring alternative embodiments, from technological enhancement and genetic modification to mutation and multispecies assemblages. Tran analyzes common science fictional tropes and representations of humanoid bodies with attention to how they are embedded in long histories of coloniality, enslavement, and racialization. By engaging the work of authors such as Octavia Butler, W. E. B. Du Bois, N. K. Jemisin, Sabrina Vourvoulias, and Charles Yu, Tran illuminates how minoritized subjects
have to grapple with what she terms the *stickiness* of their corporeality, even in speculative landscapes. Above all, the chapter accentuates how visionary science fiction can be as it presents the body as a site of contestation and revolution necessary for realizing more equitable, livable, and joyful worlds.

The final chapter of the “Genres” section, Chapter 8, examines a recent wave of transgender literature that situates itself beyond the realism and memoir to which trans* narratives have too frequently been consigned. Looking at North American transgender fictional texts, like Kai Cheng Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* (2016), which defy any pressure to perform authenticity and realness in the service of truthful embodiment, Stephanie Clare identifies a trans* fantastic that uses fantasy to practice freedom and create community. In so doing, Clare argues, recent trans*gender writers have focused less on a sense of genuine selfhood than on the social contexts that shape embodied experiences.

Part II, “Critical Approaches,” provides a series of critical fields, concepts, methods, and genealogies for analyzing bodies in literature. By delineating the role embodiment plays in seven influential fields within American literary studies – feminist theory, the history of reading and the book, disability studies, health humanities, Native studies, Black studies, and ecocriticism – this section provides readers new ways to think about bodies in research, teaching, and study. Deliberately, this section features not only critical approaches with obvious relationships to the body (e.g., disability studies and the health humanities) but also those with a perhaps less-than-clear relationship to the body (e.g., the history of reading). Doing so underscores the importance of featuring bodies as objects of analysis across multiple different inquiries and fields, foregrounding the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of American literary texts. As a whole, then, the chapters in Part II highlight how thinking critically about the body in literature interacts with other theoretical and critical categories that situate the aesthetics of literature within politics and histories of lived, embodied experience in America.

Taking Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” (1988) and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) as points of departure, Chapter 9, which focuses on feminist theory, interrogates not only the changing definitions of “sex” and “gender” but also the preoccupation with these terms as abstract universals. In it, Xine Yao looks at Black, Indigenous, and other feminist of color theorists, who have critiqued how “sex” and “gender” are articulated through racial and other biopolitical differences in order to govern and produce bodies and populations. The chapter then surveys illustrative feminist tactics – such as those navigated via queer theory and trans studies – that undermine this hegemonic dichotomization. Approaching American
literature through feminist theory, Yao ultimately finds, means reckoning with the national, historical, and ongoing policing of bodies as well as American cultural imperialism on a global scale.

In Chapter 10, focusing on the history of reading and the reading body, Thomas Constantinesco uses examples from colonial America to contemporary US literature to ask what we might learn from paying attention to the body as the site where reading takes place. In contrast to a longstanding critical tradition that conceives of reading exclusively as an act of the mind, the chapter first emphasizes how the long history of tactile reading facilitates alternative timelines, shifting literary historians’ focus to readerly communities largely occluded from more canonical histories of literature and reading. It then redescribes reading as a sensory practice. Finally, the chapter accents how somatics of reading foregrounds the materiality of the literary text and valorizes hapticality as the meeting ground of writerly practice and readerly hermeneutics.

Given the centrality of disability studies within scholarship and teaching on American literature and the body, the volume includes two chapters that introduce readers to that field: one focusing on how disability studies helps us to read and understand literary texts published before the twentieth century; and one that highlights crip-of-color critique, focusing on more recent literature. In the former (Chapter 11), Erica Fretwell tracks the development of disability studies, while suggesting how we might read disabled bodies not merely as symbolic representations but also as a way to pressure the very status of the normate body. To do so, she takes as a case study the literary history of the phantom limb: that invisible disability that both materializes the production of human difference at the level of perception and confounds facile distinctions between reality and representation. By tracing a cultural and literary history that includes writers from S. Weir Mitchell, to Charles Chesnutt, to Frances E. W. Harper, the chapter demonstrates that reading disabled bodies entails critical attunement to the affective attachments directed toward and around the idea of the unitary body and the ways that disability itself operates as a narrative structure.

In a companion chapter, Anna Hinton (Chapter 12) provides an overview of crip studies and crip-of-color critique as a method of approaching disability in contemporary American literature, particularly that by women of color. The chapter makes a case that we benefit from considering the texts of writers like Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Virginia Grise as crip literature. At its conclusion, Hinton then moves into the burgeoning field of feminist crip technoscience to position crip literature’s representation of spirituality as a crip technoscience of the spirit. Indeed, Hinton ultimately...
argues, it is within crip techno spaces that spiritual practices, particularly magic, unmake and remake worlds as well as the bodies that inhabit them.

Shifting from disability studies to the sometimes overlapping field of the health humanities, Lindsey Grubbs begins Chapter 13 by providing an overview of methodological approaches to medicine. She then offers case studies spanning the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries to ask how health humanities can offer new ways to read the body in American literature. From analyses of texts from Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799) to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), the chapter examines the framing of disease within hierarchies of race and gender. Closing with recent poetry by Bettina Judd and Kwoya Fagen Maples, Grubbs turns to how the health humanities can help us better understand structural racism in healthcare, ultimately demonstrating how narratives of illness are not just discursive but also have real impacts on bodies and minds.

Sean Teuton’s chapter on Native studies (Chapter 14) works to recast racist imaginings about Native bodily inferiority – a damaging colonial legacy that continues stubbornly to function in American literature – by asking readers either to revere a romanticized and pristine precontact Indigenous body or to pity or fear a broken, tainted, even monstrous Native body. Yet as colonialism pervades the permeable border between settler and Indigenous states, so does dominant thinking also affect the Native world, in which Indigenous people at times internalize and reproduce distorted perceptions of the ideal Indigenous body. The chapter therefore argues that critique of this ideology of Indigenous corporeal perfection engenders the potential to imagine a “new” Native body – one perhaps better connected to traditional models of wellness, but also one more realistically and honestly placed within inclusive literary and lived realities. With that new Indigenous body and a politics of identity and sovereign nationhood to serve it, Teuton argues, scholars in both Indigenous and American literary studies may better theoretically justify their work for justice.

Chapter 15 turns to Black and critical race studies to delineate the often-vexed boundary between the discursive construct of the Black body and the bodies of Black people, tracing the critical trajectory of an originary displacement through the writings of Black thinkers including Frantz Fanon, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Tavia Nyong’o. In so doing, Christine Okoth challenges the recent scholarly tendency to use “bodies” as metonyms for all aspects of racialized existence, foregrounding instead the continuous interplay between racialization, corporeality, aesthetics, and embodied theorizing. Through a thematic focus on reading and being read, the chapter also identifies literary texts and participants in racializing displacements, showing
how Black writers and artists have engaged with and subverted demands for legibility.

Finally, in Chapter 16, Delia Byrnes provides an overview of how key concepts in twenty-first century US ecocriticism relate to human embodiment, focusing particularly on embodied differences of race, gender, and disability within the broader articulation of environmental thought. With readings of writers including Jesmyn Ward, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Don DeLillo, the chapter looks at how American literature negotiates the interconnection of the human and the nonhuman. In particular, it focuses on the materialist turn in ecocriticism, analyses of “ecological otherness” as a mode of disability studies, and biopolitical theories of toxicity within the unequal distribution of environmental hazards. The chapter provides a fitting conclusion to the volume as a whole, reminding us, as it does so well, of all the ways our human bodies are embedded within ecologies that collect us to life writ large.

NOTES

4 Ibid., 68.
5 Ibid., 76, 68.
6 Ibid., 74. Emphasis in original.
7 Ibid., 77, 80.
13 Many of the chapter summaries that follow draw extensively from abstracts authored by the contributors.