

Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South

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Review

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Sommerville, Diane Miller. *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018 \$34.95 ISBN 9781469643304

Inspired by a recent “dark turn” in Civil War historiography, Diane Miller Sommerville’s *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* offers a compelling and impressive history of the destructiveness of the Civil War on the bodies, psyches, finances, and lives of southern whites and African Americans. According to Sommerville’s estimate, more than 300,000 Confederate soldiers died during the war and close to 200,000 more returned home with severe physical and emotional scars. By war’s end, the wealth of Southerners had largely vanished and the region’s economy lay in tatters. Southern whites confronted hunger, the loss and damage of property, the humiliation of military defeat, the death of loved ones, and financial ruin. In the chaos of war, even those African Americans who successfully made their way to hurriedly constructed and overcrowded contraband camps faced food insecurity, inadequate shelter from the elements, and disease. *Aberration of Mind* brilliantly analyzes how ideas and experiences relating to suicide and suffering helped shape southern life and culture following the war and set the stage for the development of a Lost Cause ideology that grounded whites’ claims to privilege and power in their allegedly unique experiences with hardship and self-murder during and following the Civil War.

Sommerville offers one of the fullest and most thoughtful accounts ever published of the human physical and mental suffering in the South during and after the Civil War. At the same time, she avoids diagnosing nineteenth-century men and women with very specific, present-day psychological disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Lacking more precise scientific terms, Civil War Era men and women used “the blue devils,” “melancholy,” and other unspecific nomenclatures to identify those suffering from mental illness. Sommerville also notes that Southerners generally linked outward emotional pain or stress with war experiences only for

those soldiers who had been confined in gruesome prisoner of war camps or had returned home with severe injuries.

Southern white men and women experienced despair during the Civil War very differently, in keeping with the diverse roles and expectations that society mandated for them. The code of Southern honor demanded that white men protect and regulate the behavior of their wives and children while also exercising control and dominance over their own fears and emotions. The requirements of war tested men's bravery and forced them to temporarily abandon their families. In camp and on the battlefield, they were expected to humbly obey their superiors and follow their orders. Unsure of their own valor, fearful of death and disfigurement, or panicked at the possibility of falling apart emotionally, many embraced suicide as an honorable way of establishing control over their destiny, avoiding public humiliation, and maintaining a sense of self-mastery. In the aftermath of the war, many men—disgraced by their loss to the Union Army and alarmed at the decimation of their plantations, farms, jobs, and businesses—faced still further uncertainty and psychological stress in a culture that had long linked manliness with outward success and financial independence.

While white men were more likely to succeed in killing themselves, white women appear to have thought and fantasized about suicide much more than their male counterparts and were more likely to institutionalize themselves in asylums. Women often struggled with loneliness, postpartum depression, and exhaustion as they found themselves forced to complete not just their own traditional domestic chores but those of their male counterparts as well. Women, often trapped in active warzones themselves, agonized over the fate of their husbands, sons, and fathers on the battlefield. In the nineteenth century, losing a husband or son meant not only the death of a partner but also the vital support of a helpmate, as well as the access to power and money that he potentially offered.

Sommerville's analysis of African Americans focuses primarily on the meanings and significance of slave suicides and on the broader psychological suffering of African Americans between 1865 and the early 1880s. During the Antebellum Era, masters defended slavery with claims that their paternalism protected African Americans from hardships, self-harm, and poverty. Georgia Senator James Henry Hammond, for example, claimed that he had never recalled "a single instance of deliberate self-destruction on the part of a slave" (p. 85). Sommerville argues that, given the role that claims of slave self-preservation have historically

played in proslavery arguments, the documentation of “incidents of self-murder . . . constitutes one step toward reclaiming the full array of experiences, moods, and feelings of the enslaved” (p.88). She offers a “neo-abolitionist” explanation for the slave suicides that she uncovers—identifying them not as political acts of resistance aimed at directly challenging the authority and dominance of their masters, but as highly individual acts aimed at breaking free from personal suffering and despair triggered by, among other causes, “dislocation and separation from family and loved ones, sexual assault, ill-treatment at the hands of overseers and masters, and threat of recapture” (p. 98). Other historians such as Richard Bell have emphasized the political significance of slave suicides as many nineteenth-century African American abolitionists increasingly embraced and publicized slave self-murders as militant acts of rebellion and as claims for their own full rights in a nation that linked liberty, manhood, and citizenship with a willingness to die rather than accept subordination.¹

In the chaotic aftermath of the war, emancipated slaves confronted a high mortality rate resulting from “epidemics, exposure to the elements, hunger and malnutrition, separation from supportive networks,” which led to widespread “psychological disorders that at times included suicidal behavior” (p.123). During the Antebellum Era, proslavery advocates defended the use of corporal punishment and the separation of slave families by claiming that the dullness of African Americans prevented them from feeling pain or suffering. Following the war, ex-masters were no longer invested in providing health care for their former slaves and turned a blind eye to black hardship. Primarily catering to white patients, asylums identified black patients as suffering from mania and occasionally from dementia or delusional insanity. Racist notions of black degradation encouraged white physicians and bureaucrats to claim that African Americans lacked the sensitivity and intelligence to succumb to “melancholy” and suicide.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white Southerners, spurred on partially by Edmund Ruffin’s famous suicide in the war’s aftermath, claimed the shrouds of “melancholy” and self-murder as their own birthrights, and they identified themselves and their way of life as the true victims of a war in which they had fired the first shot. Lost-Cause advocates portrayed their own idealistic suffering, sacrifice, and suicidal resistance as markers of

¹ Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 235-246.

a refined white nobility unavailable to avaricious Northerners and so-called “manic” African Americans. Sommerville indirectly suggests that this postwar valorization of self-murder in defense of an unrecoverable southern past helps explain the social and cultural underpinnings of a key force underlying the passions, violence, and animus that white Southerners have long aimed against the Civil Rights Movement and other modern movements for social change. One can only hope that future scholars will extend Sommerville’s insights still further by more fully examining the origins and evolution of the counter-narratives and counter-memories of suicide and suffering that African Americans and progressive white activists have constructed to advance their own visions of social justice.

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