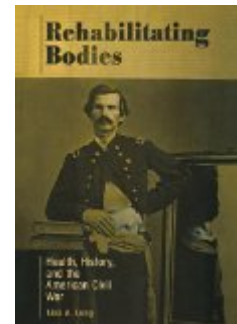


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa A. Long. *Rehabilitating Bodies: Health, History, and the American Civil War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 332 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3748-1.

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## Too Many Bodies

It is important to realize at the outset that, the title notwithstanding, this is not a work of history. Despite its title, this book would best be described as a rhetoric professor's post-modernist literary theory or criticism. Author Lisa A. Long, an English professor at North Central College in Illinois, has taken various aspects of Civil War medicine, including some reports of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, and combined them with post-war fiction about the Civil War to "reimagine" a theory about Civil War bodies. Each of the seven chapters focuses on some sort of body: doctor's bodies, dead bodies, sanitized bodies, experimental bodies, soldier's bodies, nursing bodies, and historical bodies. These chapters are arranged somewhat chronologically from the Civil War to the turn of the century to show the progression of her idea of bodies.

In her introduction, Long explains that "my goal here is not necessarily to generate new knowledge about the Civil War, but rather to explore how the Civil War has become a lasting trope and to chart how that becoming is dictated by the vagaries of the human body" (p. 19). It is reasonable to say that Long does meet these goals since she does not "generate new knowledge about the Civil War"; rather she treats everything as a trope or representation of something else, and she ties it all together, often in most incongruous ways, with imaginings about the human body.

Long has chosen her source material very selectively. All the writings are Northern. She has chosen Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, an eminent post-war neurologist, as her

main subject in the first chapter, but, while she refers to his medical writings, she is mainly interested in his fiction involving diseased doctors. The subject of dead bodies in chapter 2 is addressed by the examination of several novels. In chapter 3, Long uses some papers of the U.S. Sanitary Commission to draw some theoretical conclusions, mainly as a foil for her discussion of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, a novel by John William DeForest. In chapter 4, the author utilizes the non-fiction writing of Charlotte Forten and James Gooding to discuss race and gender. Chapter 5 analyzes two novels to depict soldier's bodies. Chapter 6 deals with a few sources about white women nurses but mainly focuses on the memoir of black laundress and nurse Susie King Taylor. Evidently only turn-of-the-century black writers are important historians, because the works of four of them are the only sources for chapter 7. In the epilogue, Long discusses Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic* and several recent children's novels about the Civil War.

It is evident from this list that no chapter depends upon a broad range of sources. Because Long is intent on "reimagining" things, it does not matter whether something was written at the time of the Civil War or long after, by someone who was there or not, or whether the source is fiction or non-fiction. All have equal value. The treatment of the medical sources of Mitchell and the Sanitary Commission most frustrated this reviewer, because Long was only interested in trope or metaphor for disease and its effects, not what the subjects were actually experiencing or seeking to combat. In fact, Long stated

that “all Civil War texts were founded on particularized bodily experiences and were impossible to verify” (p. 27). (She reiterates this idea in other places also.)

In her discussion of Dr. Mitchell, who headed Turner’s Lane hospital for nerve injuries in Philadelphia (not Turner J. Lane, as she calls it), she emphasizes his concern to distinguish the truly ill from malingerers, those who were feigning disease to get out of military service. This is a valid concern as doctors North and South tangled with fakers of various sorts, but also had genuinely ill patients whose disease had no discernible cause. However, Long goes into theoretical cogitations to posit that “malingering became a trope in postbellum America for the ontological uncertainty of Americans who could no longer gauge how they felt” (p. 31). In fact, she states, “the Civil War era, with its masses of diseased participants, established that all postbellum survivors would be long-suffering malingerers” (p. 34). Surely this is a stretch of interpretation.

In chapter 3, Long seems to treat all the Sanitary Commission’s concerns about “sanitation” as representing something else, especially ulterior motives involving control. She does not seem to believe that the Commission really did face filth and lack of supplies. For example, the Sanitary Commission’s urgings to send boxes of supplies for general distribution rather than to individual soldiers had its basis in huge quantities of wasted goods which could not be delivered to the recipient in time due to troop movements and other exigencies of

war. The Commission was not trying “to expedite psychic repression” (p. 94). When faced with the reality of grossly unsanitary conditions, serious supply shortages, and numerous sick and wounded soldiers, the Sanitary Commission acted; they did not sit down and reimagine!

The most interesting and historically oriented chapter is the seventh, in which Long analyzes the efforts of four turn-of-the-century historians to prove the “manhood” of blacks through depictions of their qualities and actions as Civil War soldiers. At the same time that the historians tried to combat the increasing Jim Crow restrictions of the period, they had to avoid anything that would suggest sexual manhood because of the prevalence of race-based lynching, most often excused by charges of rape. The insertion of the term “bodies” at various points seems to force the connection to the theme, rather than contribute to the discussion.

Long opens chapter 7 with an epigraph. A portion of that quotation by Frederick Douglass seems to summarize this book in ways which Long probably did not intend. “A fervid imagination sometimes entirely upsets and supplants the plain and obvious teachings of common sense. In the glare of enthusiasm, fiction is often mistaken for fact” (p. 210). No doubt there are people who will consider this book to be a “cutting edge” study. However, this reviewer, who had hoped for additional knowledge about Civil War medicine, found it to be disappointing.

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