

Review: The Sisters' War? Reviewed Work(s): All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies by Elizabeth D. Leonard; Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War by Elizabeth Young Review by: Stephanie McCurry Source: The Women's Review of Books, Vol. 17, No. 12 (Sep., 2000), pp. 21-23 Published by: Old City Publishing, Inc. Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4023555 Accessed: 13-06-2020 00:08 UTC

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counselor in a Zurich unemployment office, summarized our reactions in a subsequent article on the Salecina conference: "In the discussion, Giarini/ Liedtke were criticized for not having taken the question of gender very seriously and for not having grasped changes in the forms of work and the family. In these matters, they remain conservative."3

The expansion of the civil service proposed by Giarini and Liedtke was another point of considerable discussion at Salecina. The use of compulsion in this first sector, which recalls our workfare system, was hotly debated. Psychiatrist Henrique Schenkel of Berne saw advantages in requiring work of depressed persons and single mothers: social contacts may well ensue and passivity decline. But Berlin community activist Sabine Hartmann advocated voluntary engagement in neighborhood organizations which foster both independence and cooperation. There are echoes here of the conflict between socialists and libertarians which has divided the Left since Marx and Bakunin collided. Yet there is also common ground: the belief that work can overcome loneliness by creating collegial bonds and common goals.

What became clear to me at Salecina is that the European debate about work concerns far more than bread-and-butter issues. In Europe today, there is a widespread perception of alienation, and tremendous disagreement on how to remedy the situation. The Left recommends vague but charismatic abstractions like "solidarity," "neighborliness" and "commitment." It longs for new forms of community, but is unsure whether they can exist under state auspices or only through grassroots activity based on mutual aid. While the report to the Club of Rome did not answer that question, it was valuable at Salecina as a touchstone or foil-something to bounce off, in order to arrive elsewhere. In criticizing Giarini and Liedtke, participants were able to clarify and assert their own values.

What I heard time and again from the leftists in Salecina is that they don't want an American boom. They know that jobs in the US are characterized by extreme disparities in salary levels, benefits and hours worked. That single mothers, unable to find adequate and affordable childcare, are often desperate when welfare is no longer an option. That many people in our overcrowded prisons and homeless shelters could not find a job. They want another model of society. Feminists in America, who are aware that our low unemployment figures mask massive social problems, should hope that Europe finds a better way. -65

¹ On the history of Salecina, see Rudolf M. Lüscher and Werner Schweizer, Amalie und Theo Pinkus-De Sassi. Leben im

The sisters' war?

by Stephanie McCurry

All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies

by Elizabeth D. Leonard. New York: W. W. Norton,

1999, 368 pp., \$27.95 hardcover.

Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American

Civil War by Elizabeth Young. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1999, 389 pp., \$18.00 paper.

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vast pedagogical industry works white Confederate siblings, ceaselessly to oblige young Americans to remember/forget the hostilities of 1861-65 as a great 'civil war' between brothers," the Englishman Benedict Anderson has written, "rather than between-as they briefly weretwo sovereign nation states." Anderson is right. Amid the metaphorical profusion of Civil War representation, "the brothers' war" holds pride of place. The term is a mythic rather than a strictly historical one, which accounts, of course, for its power. It resists efforts to pin it down as to time or place of origin: Anderson offers no authority for his judgment except popular belief, and neither does anyone else.

The metaphor has been around for ages in the tendency to equate "national fracture with the struggle of 'brother against brother'," as Elizabeth Young points out. It was probably already there in the war itself-in Walt Whitman's poetic reflections on the transcendent meaning and mutuality of soldiers' deaths, for example, and in Louisa May Alcott's 1863 story of black Union and

"The Brothers." More than a century before Ken Burns' documentary, the idea of the Civil War as "the brothers' war" was circulating in popular culture. There it remains, at the heart of the lucrative Civil War industry.

But the term is a feminist provocation. Like red flag to bull, it challenges us to charge into the history of the war armed with women and women's stories. That is no easy task. The very framework is prohibitive: in framing the war as the story of battles, soldiers and the common experiences of white men, "the brothers' war" signifies the "real subject" of Civil War history and culture. It's a man's war. Women are, at best, marginal to the main action. Thirty years of modern feminist scholarship on women and the war, North and South, have not fundamentally altered the narrative: we know a lot more about nurses and the Sanitary Commission on the Union side, a lot more about the home front and the battle over white women's loyalty on the Confederate side. But the struggle to "make the war ours as well as the men's,"

as Confederate Kate Cummings once put it, goes on.

Elizabeth Leonard and Elizabeth Young each take up the challenge of writing women's Civil War. Each engages directly the exclusionary narrative of brothers and battles, men and soldiers, though in contrasting ways. Leonard, a historian at Colby College, works within the dominant narrative in order, presumably, to transform it. Her book is a documentary recovery of the many mostly unknown cases of women who served in the Civil War armies, as spies, scouts and especially cross-dressed soldiers, as well as the better known women of the army who served as daughters of the regiment, vivandiers and nurses. Young, a literary critic at Mount Holyoke College, takes more license with the subject, replacing the canonical construction of Civil War literature and its male authors with a broader definition of "civil wars" and Civil War writing. Her book extends from the prewar fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe through readings of Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Keckley, Lorta Velasquez, Frances Harper and Margaret Mitchell to Rosellen Brown's 1984 novel Civil Wars. With women soldiers and "soldiers-manqué," Leonard and Young do feminist battle with "the brothers' war."

In All the Daring of the Soldier Leonard doesn't interrogate the conventional focus on battles and soldiers, military intelligence and military service, but mines the historical record for evidence of women's military participation. This is a "women were there too" book of an unapologetic kind. It consists of three sets of paired chapters about, respectively, women spies and resistance operatives, women of the armies (defined to include soldiers' female relations and friends, laundresses, cooks, provisioners, official and unofficial nurses and camp followers or sex workers) and, finally,

Wayang

On the train across Java we slept in a knot: my head in your lap, your head on my back,

two hundred miles through the tropical dark in shuddering third class. At every major stop,

a skirmish of shouted lightvendors hawking tea and rice to sleep-drugged passengersreceded in a rush,

the jasmine-scented silence sweet and abrupt. When the station's speakers keened their exit song,

against my faded dress, my braids strict shadows on your moonlit back, our fractured dreams resettling ...

Outside Bandung at dawn, I shook my buzzing limbs, cracked our dirty window open to mountain air.

A boy wrapped in a shawl shot past in the brightening field. One child, then anothera horde of barefoot children

in tattered pastel sweaters raced beside the tracks, calling out for coins, for candies,

a pregnant girl, waist-long hair undone, stepped out of a hovel fastening her sarong.

We passed her without speaking, tugging at the taut string of our marriage as it rose over rice-fields,

climbing into monsoon clouds, swaying there---spiraling--not some thing, not a child's kite:

our common life, flown above another Asian city in the year we made a home out of our bodies.

Widerspruch, 2nd revised ed. (Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1994), pp. 386-400. ² A booklet with these papers, entitled Zur Zukunft der Arbeit. Beiträge der Salecina-Tagungen 1997 und 1998 can be purchased from Stiftung Salecina, Postfach, 7516 Maloja, Switzerland. Salecina's schedule of events and the program for its next seminar on the future of work (Sept. 28-Oct. 1, 2000) can be obtained by contacting that address or Tel. 0041-81-824-3239, FAX 0041-81-824-3575, e-mail: info@salecina.ch

³ Martin Uebelhart, "Pensionierungsalter 78?" in AM-Agenda, Die Schweizer Arbeitsmarktzeitschrift, No. 10 (November 1999), p. 15.

the train lurched on. Whirr of palm and banyan, gibbous moon, skewed night skygreen stars above the village mosque

jumped and scuttled by in deranged constellations. We stretched, switched positions: your hair red as rosestalks

falling far behind us by the time we reached their shanties: tin roofs at the rail-bed's edge-

doorways set in sloping walls, a threshing floor, an open sewer. As our train slowed

-Jody Bolz

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women soldiers. There is one chapter on "the question of motivation." Each of the paired sets includes one chapter about women whose stories are already well known or can be reconstructed at length (the Belle Boyds and Rose Greenhows of the war), followed by another about the unknown "host" of army women designed to prove "how widespread and how complex the phenomenon of women's activity really was during the war."

Leonard has labored mightily to make her case, combing through, for example, the "130 published volumes (a total of more than 138,000 pages) of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," for evidence of female spies, scouts and resistance operatives who "came to the attention of authorities on both sides of the conflict." Her faith in the power of documentary recovery as the centerpiece of the historian's craft is proclaimed on every page.

All the Daring of the Soldier is a combination of good storytelling and dull compendium. There is the fascinating case of Annie Etheridge, who carried official status as the "Daughter of the Regiment" from the third and fifth Michigan infantry regiments, and who received the Kearny Cross awarded to "meritorious and distinguished noncommissioned officers and privates" after three years' service as a field nurse. Etheridge was officially mustered out with the rest of her regiment at the end of the war in July 1865 and was buried in Arlington cemetery at her death in 1913. Or Jennie Hodgers, a.k.a. Albert C. J. Cashier, an Irish woman enabled by the war to extend her habit of cross-dressing and passing as a man from the world of casual labor to service as a Union soldier. Hodgers served with the 95th Illinois Infantry Volunteers from 1862 until the end of the war, then lived out most of the rest of her life as a man, collecting her veteran's pension and joining the Grand Army of the Republic. Even specialists will be surprised at the stories Leonard has turned up.

But Leonard's faith in the power of evidence also seduces her into including long lists of names of women about whom she admits "we can know very little beyond the fact that military officials on one side or the other deemed their activities... sufficiently troublesome-or meritorious-to deserve comment." The listing or recording instinct is familiar to historians-we found it, let's cite it-but it is also one to resist, more appropriate to notecards, index, or catalogue than to a fully realized historical analysis.

This is the main problem with the book. For if Leonard epitomizes the historians' belief in the value of documentary evidence, her faith in its naked powers stand on the extreme end of contemporary practice. She is openly compensatory in her method and celebratory in her perspective. "In All the Daring of the Soldier," she writes, "I have attempted to bring more of these daring, brave, and high-spirited women's stories forward in order to shed light on their sheer numbers and on the range of contributions they made to the military organizations and the political causes they served." Thinking through what women's presence in the Civil War armies means for the received history of the war is not high on her agenda.

Only in the final chapter of the book does Leonard engage directly in interpretation of the evidence, even then construing meaning in respect, narrowly, to "The Question of Motivation." "So why did they do it," she asks, and offers this answer: most did it "not only out of patriotism or to follow loved ones but also because it provided a superior alternative to the limited forms of waged work available to such women in civilian life." The only politics "women of the Civil War armies" apparently had is gender politics, the only relevant identity gender identity. They lived a parallel war, still ironically a "women's war," out of the political fray over slavery and Union. Throwing Union and Confederate women promiscuously together in each chapter, rarely pausing to consider the structural differences that might explain their different presence in contending armies, and relegating explicit analysis to the "question of motivation" for doing men's work-in the end Leonard puts her women on the battlefield but leaves them out of Civil War history. In All the Daring of the Soldier, the women are there, sure enough, but what that means she appears not to know or, really, to care.

or Elizabeth Young, by contrast, the interpretive act is paramount. None of the Civil War era works she examines are unusual offerings--indeed Uncle Tom's Cabin seems to be the obligatory proving ground for young literary critics these days-although Elizabeth Keckley is a little off the beaten track. But Young's definition of 'women's Civil War writing" is decidedly innovative, a "counter genealogy," she calls it. It emphasizes fiction but also includes "memoirs, diaries, letters, oratory, cartoons, songs, plays, films, memorabilia and Civil War reenactments"; and it embraces texts from the 1860s to the present, including a number of twentieth-century novels-even late twentiethcentury ones-never previously regarded as part of a Civil War literary corpus.

For Young the Civil War is as much "multivalent cultural symbol as... literal setting." "This book is about 'civil wars' in many senses," she offers: "between North and South, black and white, and male and female, but also among women, within women, and between individual and nation." She is as much concerned with civil wars as the Civil War.

The approach produces interesting readings-of Louisa May Alcott, especially. Here Young's general thesis, that women's texts "repeatedly interweave

female rebellions against civility with the Civil War itself" finds powerful expression. "I set forth ... feeling as if I was the son of the house going to war," Alcott wrote in her journal on the eve of her departure to Washington, DC to nurse wounded soldiers in Union army hospitals. "The war... marks Alcott's coming of age as a man," Young wittily observes. But Alcott's gender crossings are not confined to her journals or her personal struggles at "psychic self-regulation." She constantly "blurs gender designations" in her fiction, Young points out, feminizing the wounded soldiers in Hospital Sketches, for example, while relocating "the traits of masculinity within the figure of the female nurse." As performed by Tribulation Periwinkle, Hospital Sketches' fictional nurse, "nursing seems less a form of mothering than a means of soldiering." Alcott, in short, finds generative metaphorical ground in the nation's Civil War for her own internal civil wars against conventional femininity.

But if, as Young argues, "Alcott's work provides insight into the possibilities, metaphoric as well as literal, that the Civil War afforded women for rebellion," the insight can be cheapened by overuse. It works less well for Stowe, for example. Young's treatment of Stowe focuses exclusively on Uncle Tom's Cabin and the figure of Topsy, whom she reads as "a reflexive commentary on the culture of nineteenth century white women's America as well as the 'fears and desires' of Harriet Beecher Stowe." Just as the South is "low-other" to Stowe's North, Young argues, so "Topsy corporealizes white female rebellion pushed 'downward' through psychic repression, racial differentiation, and geographic displacement." Like Jo March, Topsy figures Stowe's "civil war' over white women's civility." "Stowe's novel was engaged in 'civil wars' long before the Civil War itself," Young observes, "both enacting and containing a war against civility whose emblem is the figure of Topsy.'

But this reading strains credulity. With Alcott, Young fully identifies the limits of her argument. Concluding a rich longitudinal survey of Alcott's fiction from Hospital Sketches to Jo's Boys, she wisely cautions, "Alcott's women conclude their inner civil wars with a marked victory of civility over conflict." But if Alcott ultimately submits to civility, hers is at least a heroic struggle Stowe's rebellion against conventional femininity, by contrast, is weakly waged and lost within the confines of one novel. For Topsy is, after all, a viciously

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drawn character, and the burden of Topsy and the novel itself is not to interrogate but to enforce the terms of civility for white women of the Civil War generation.

It is a conclusion hard to resist when one considers the content and meaning of Stowe's work over time. For while most literary critics, Young included, focus obsessively on Uncle Tom's Cabin, Stowe's later war and postbellum writings, including her private papers, point to a very different conclusion, concerned as they are with the publication and marketing of the accoutrements of conventional female civility (as in American Woman's Home), with her own view of appropriate domestic relations between women servants and employers in a free labor society (in House and Home Papers) and with the new relations between freedpeople and their employers in the postemancipation South, including her own Florida plantation (in "The Colored Labor of the South").¹ Analysis of Alcott's private writings and the direction of her fiction over time afforded Young a wise perspective on the limits of Alcott's "civil wars," but it is precisely that broader perspective that is missing in the treatment of Stowe.

Finally, there is the matter of words themselves, especially "Civil War" and "civil wars." As Young explains at the outset, "I take the metaphoric implications of the Civil War as broadly as possible," and she goes on to define metaphor "as a connective mode of reasoning." But what is the nature of the connection assumed? Young's theory of cultural analysis is curiously unarticulated. When she finds the term "topsy" in turn-of-the-century Southern commentaries about Confederate defeat and emancipation-Charlestonian slave William Middleton referred to "the utter topsy-turveying of all our institutions"-she connects it, implausibly, to the specific figure of Topsy and the influence of her creator, Stowe.

The problem of association is compounded as she moves away from the Civil War as a "concrete historical frame" into treatment of, for example, mid- and late twentieth-century texts. Then it becomes entirely unclear whether the "connective mode of reasoning" is hers alone or is at work at all in the writing in question. Does Rosellen Brown's 1984 novel Civil Wars play out the metaphoric implications of the American Civil War? Does it matter if Brown sees the connection or is it enough that Young does? Like topsyturvey, surely the words "civil wars" have meaning independent of one historical event. It takes more than the same words to make historically meaningful metaphorical connection. In the end, the very multivalence of the Civil War as a cultural symbol renders Young's notion of "women's writing

A childhood in hell

by Willa Schneberg

When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the

Khmer Rouge by Chanrithy Him. New York:

W. W. Norton, 2000, 330 pp.,

\$23.95 hardcover.

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pril 15, 2000, was the final day of the three-day Cambodian New Year celebration, also called the "Time of New Angels," when in Khmer tradition old angels are sent back to heaven and new angels replace them. I was told that Chanrithy Him, who now lives in Eugene, Oregon, would be at the hangar-sized West Linn Pagoda, celebrating with other survivors of the "killing fields" and many who were born after. But it was impossible to find her in the wat, where everyone crammed in wearing their finest traditional clothing. Each family member carried an offering for the monks or for their own ancestors. The table was piled high with small bowls, precariously balanced on each other, full of noodles and broiled fish, rice with sweet-and-sour sauce, yams, beef curry and mint, coconut milk soup, and deep fried bananas. There was more food than most Khmers saw during the entire four years from 1975 to 1979 when Pol Pot ground Cambodia down to zero and turned it into a nightmarish parody of a Maoist utopia.

Many of those present remembered when people were hanged for marrying without state sanctions or for merely speaking French, or starved to death after winnowing rice they were not allowed to eat. I imagine Chanrithy Him not in this holy place where food is abundant, but in Cambodia during the "Pol Pot Time," when she was always famished, rummaging through garbage for fish heads, putting her life in danger to suck on sweet grass and using a small tin can with unhusked rice as bait to catch mice to roast.

From 1992 to 1993 I worked in Cambodia, setting up registration sites for the United Nations Transitional Authority during the UN-sponsored elections and serving as a medical liaison officer with UN Volunteers. During that time I was honored to work with many survivors of the killing fields recently repatriated from Thai border camps. I was saddened to learn shortly after attending the New Year's celebration that Him is involved in a contract dispute with a journalist-editor over the authorship of her memoir When Broken Glass Floats. Whatever the outcome of that dispute, my desire is to believe that this is Chanrithy Him's story-if only because of the many horrific stories I've heard from other Khmer survivors. The force of this memoir lies in the present-tense immediacy of lived experience, told vividly through a child's lens. The events unfold chronologically: as the memoir opens, Him is living in the affluent province of Takeo southwest of Phnom Penh with her parents. It comes to a close when she immigrates to the United States at sixteen. An uncle living in Oregon spon-

sors her and her four brothers and sisters. Only these five from a family of twelve have survived.

If im's story begins in a happier time, when she is three years old. Her mother points to a comet whizzing through the sky: "Mak lifted me up and I saw the heavenly body with a starlike nucleus and a long, luminous tail. Its radiance was intensified by the dark sky and the surrounding stars. We were all in awe, crowded near our mother, leaning against the railing."

But even this miraculous event is interpreted by Him's mother as a foreshadowing of the appalling. She solemnly tells Him and her siblings a folk belief—that when a comet's tail points in the direction of a particular country, that country will be at war with Cambodia. Within a year, North and South Vietnam will do battle inside Cambodia's border and the United States will engage in secret bombing. Seven years later, Pol Pot will put his country in a stranglehold.

Chanrithy Him was nine when the Khmer Rouge took power; she was an adolescent by the time the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and the nightmare stopped. Her father, a government worker and businessman, was killed during the first year of Khmer Rouge domination. Taken away to be "orientated," he dug his own grave and was executed. Two years later, Him's mother died of starvation, amoebic dysentery and edema.

Children were separated from their parents and lived with other children in huts they built themselves. They were assigned to child brigades to dig irrigation ditches, haul dirt and plant rice. Him was forced to plant rice seeds when she was too exhausted to stand. She hauntingly describes "stealing" sour leaves for her infected foot:

I crawl on my hands and knees away from the village, past a grove of mango trees to a hill where the dead are buried. I follow a tight path carved to fit oxcarts. Past guava and banana trees I crawl, searching for sour leaves, the leaf of life... Hands flying, I grab the other sour vines, pulling leaves... I am lost in the movements.

(pp.156-157)

Moments later she will be bound to a tree and threatened with death by a Khmer Rouge for her "traitorous deed."

For a short period Him is reunited with her mother, but soon Mak is taken

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and the Civil War" so diffuse that its value as a counter-canon is hard to grasp.

Between All the Daring of the Soldier and Disarming the Nation exists a world of interpretive and disciplinary difference. Careful recovery, of historical evidence in one, clever analysis of words in the other, a "brothers' war" still holding sway in the popular imagination of the American Civil War.

¹ See Rachel N. Klein, "Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Domestication of Free Labor Ideology," a paper presented to the American Studies Program, Northwestern University, April 2000. Mr. Marvin G. Parnes IRWG Search Committee Office of the VP for Research University of Michigan 503 Thompson Street 4080 Fleming Administration Building Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1340

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