Aberration of Mind

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

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Having spent over a decade living with and working on death and dying, the backing and good humor of friends, family, and colleagues has been critical in keeping me grounded in life and living. It is a pleasure to thank publicly the many individuals and institutions that provided support to me and this research project. I have enjoyed financial support from a number of institutions that was vital to the completion of this book. The dean of Harpur College of Arts and Sciences and now provost at Binghamton University, Donald Nieman, made available research funds and endorsed leaves that allowed me to travel, research, and write. I was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship that permitted me to step away from my teaching obligations for a year to focus entirely on this work. I received research fellowships from the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, the North Caroliniana Society, and the Virginia Historical Society that facilitated travel to crucial repositories, for which I am thankful.

I am exceedingly grateful to the anonymous readers of this book in manuscript form who shared incredibly smart and insightful suggestions that helped me to rethink my approach and strengthen my argument, but who also gently nudged me to sharpen my analysis and clarify my thinking. They also were terrific boosters. The editorial and production team at the University of North Carolina Press—Chuck Grench, Jad Adkins, Cate Hodorowicz, and Jay Mazzocchi—was great at every stage of the process and provided much-needed assistance at critical junctures, most notably when a family health crisis materialized during copyediting and threatened the production schedule. Beatrice Burton provided expert indexing support. I had critical last-minute help securing images from Terri L. Snyder, Beth Kilmarx, Liz Argentieri, and Andrew Fagal.

Portions of this book appear in previously published works, and I am grateful for the permission to reprint some of that repurposed material here. Lesley Gordon, the editor at Civil War History, encouraged me to submit my work on Confederate soldiers for consideration. I am glad she did. Two anonymous readers provided helpful critiques that made the article better. I received invitations to participate in two conferences that resulted in publications. In 2009, Stephen Berry ran a conference at the University of Georgia at which I presented a paper that eventually appeared as a chapter in a

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book he edited, *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War’s Ragged Edges*. Portions of that essay appear in chapters 5 and 6 in this book. Two years later, I attended a conference at North Carolina State University that resulted in the publication of a chapter in *Death and the American South*, edited by Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover. That piece is reworked as chapter 8. I appreciate the opportunity to have my work appear in these fine anthologies shepherded by such talented and mindful editors and for the feedback of the participants of the conferences they convened. I thank the University of Georgia Press and Cambridge University Press for allowing me to reprint portions of those chapters in this book.

Much of the material presented here was vetted at professional conferences and workshops at which I received valuable feedback from audiences, co-panelists, and commentators including Victor Bailey, Rick Bell, Jane Turner Censer, Doug Egerton, Michael Kral, Chandra Manning, Christopher Phillips, David Silkenat, Terri L. Snyder, and Sasha Turner. I am pleased to have been part of the programs sponsored by the following professional organizations and gatherings: the British American Nineteenth-Century Historians, Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, Social Sciences History Association, Southern Historical Association, Society for Civil War Historians, Organization of American Historians, Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, Southern Association for Women Historians, Kentucky Civil War Governors Symposium, and Upstate Early American History Workshop at Binghamton University.

I have learned that in the academy there is nothing more valued than time. So it is with deep appreciation that I acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of professional friends and colleagues who have provided much-needed critiques and suggestions over the years. The club of suicide historians in the United States is a small but supportive group. Terri L. Snyder, David Silkenat, Alison Efford, and Rick Bell graciously offered their ideas on my work without an iota of territorial jealousy. They are the embodiment of collegiality. A number of historian friends and acquaintances took time away from their own busy lives to read portions of my work, for which I am grateful and I promise to repay in kind: Jane Turner Censer, Doug Egerton, Carole Emberton, Lorri Glover, Lesley Gordon, Matt Hulbert, J. David Hacker, Earl Hess, Sean Kelley, Howard I. Kushner, Megan Kate Nelson, Rob Parkinson, Anne Sarah Rubin, Jeff Strickland, and Mitchell Snay. I also owe a debt to those who read my work, sang my praises, and wrote letters on my behalf. Thank you Jane Turner Censer, John Inscoe, and Jan Lewis.

I was fortified intellectually, and frankly entertained, by a number of my current and former colleagues, whose company and friendship over the years I cherish: Douglas Bradburn, Howard Brown, J. David Hacker, Rob
Parkinson, and Stephen Ortiz. And of course, the Southern wouldn’t be the Southern without my annual dinner date with Mitchell Snay. I am one lucky girl to have these amazing men in my orbit.

When word spread that I was working on suicide, I received research nuggets from a number of scholars from all quarters of Southern archives, many of which are embedded in these pages. Thank you for thinking of me Pete Carmichael, Sarah Gardner, Jonathan Jones, Jim Lothian, Brian Craig Miller, Peter Moore, John Riley, David Silkenat, David Smoot, Antoinette G. van Zelm, and Jonathan White. Jeff Strickland and Douglas Eckberg generously shared their Charleston death databases with me. “Bigly” research assistance came by way of Jesslyn Graham and Andrew Menfi; Christopher Pearl, Daniel Pearson, and Kevin Murphy built amazing databases of my asylum patients, while enabling my Excel phobia. Jan Lewis, who served as my dissertation adviser and was central in shaping my first book, provided me with the skills, and confidence, to go without the adviser training wheels this time around. She continues to be my biggest cheerleader, and I will always cherish our friendship.

I lecture my graduate students on the importance of wooing archivists while on their research trips. I’ve taken my own advice for years and with terrific results. Librarians and archival staff from a number of Southern archival sites were enormously helpful during my research trips. Thanks to the staffs at the Virginia Historical Society (now the Virginia Museum for History and Culture), especially the lovely Frances Pollard, the Library of Virginia, the Georgia Archives, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the Museum of the Confederacy (now the American Civil War Museum), Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Perkins Library at Duke University, the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, and the Louise Pettus Archives, Dacus Library, Winthrop University. The Interlibrary Loan staff at the Binghamton University Library has utterly spoiled me with their quick and efficient responses to my voluminous requests. I have also benefited enormously from the dogged research of the army of genealogists whose labor tracking down ancestors from their past make those findings available to the likes of me.

When I launched this project, my daughter, Shannon, was in high school, my son, Jackson, was in elementary school, and my husband, Don, had not a gray hair on his head. Today, my daughter is a hotshot sports reporter and my son is a newly minted college graduate. My husband, and I, have more gray hair than we care to admit, though my stylist is so good I don’t have to. Point being, I’ve been working on this book for a very, very long time, which has required oodles of patience from those I love. I thank my husband for stepping up this past year especially when the book took over my life and left
time for little else: he cooked dinner, grocery shopped, and kept the wine fridge fully stocked with pinot grigio, though he drew the line at grooming the dogs. Even when cancer intruded and made an ugly, unwelcome appearance and threatened to upend our lives, our routines, our work, and our peace, he made it easy to be his caregiver. Without my family, my journey would not have been nearly as fun or rewarding. My endeavor surely has struck them as interminably long. If they remember anything about me and my efforts, I hope it is that “she persisted.” I lovingly dedicate this book to them.
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